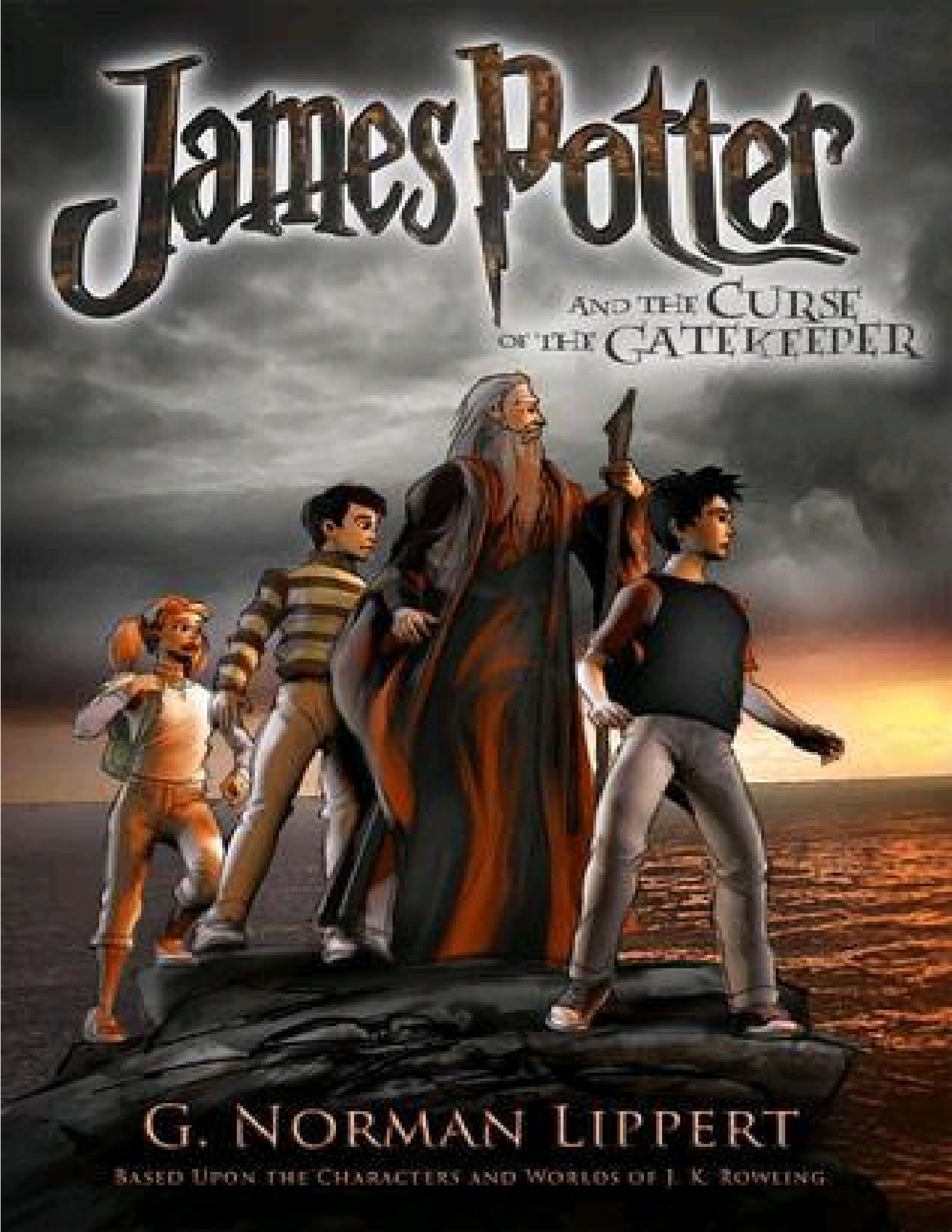
James Potter

And the Curse of the Gatekeeper



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Based Upon the Characters and Worlds of J. K. Rowling

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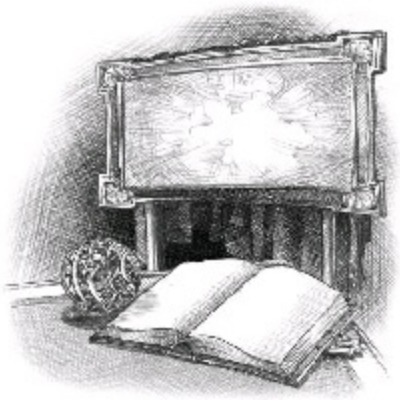

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Dedication

For Greer: a Rose by any other name...

Prologue

Rain fell in great sheets, hitting the pavement hard enough to send up a blattering, dirty mist. A small man stood on the corner, under the only working streetlamp, and studied the street.

Abandoned apartment buildings lined one side, dark and hulking, like dead dinosaurs. The other side was dominated by an equally dismal factory behind a chain-link fence. Warning signs on the fence squeaked and rattled in the wind. One car was parked along the street, looking as if it had been there long enough to become part of the local ecosystem. The small man shuffled his feet, his bald head glistening with rain. He glanced back, toward the busier streets from which he'd just come, and then made a harrumphing noise. He pulled his fist out of his overcoat pocket and held it up to the light. When he opened his hand, there was a small, sodden bit of parchment inside it. He read the words on the parchment for the tenth time. Blue-inked letters spelled the street name and nothing else. The man shook his head, annoyed.

He was about to close the bit of parchment into his fist again when the words bled away in the dripping rain. The little man blinked at the space where they had been. Slowly, new words appeared on the paper, as if inked by an invisible hand: an address.

The little man frowned at the parchment, and then shoved it back into his pocket. Glancing aside, he located a number over the door of the nearest abandoned apartment. He sighed and walked out of the yellow glow of the streetlight, splashing heedlessly in the flooded gutter.

As most people who knew how to look would know, the little man wasn't a man at all. He was a goblin. His name was Forge and he hated venturing into the human world. Not that anyone had ever noticed his unusual size or strange features. He wore boots with four-inch heels and a Visum-ineptio charm that caused people to see him as a kindly old man with a severe stoop. He simply didn't like humans. They were dirty, inefficient, and rowdy. Forge liked his world to be like his workshop: neat, organized, and constantly swept of any useless bits. It wasn't so much that Forge wished humans didn't exist; he was simply glad that they had their own special world to live in, and that he rarely had to go there, rather like a zoo.

He'd almost decided not to come out tonight. Something hadn't felt right about this appointment. Considering Forge's unique skills, it was not unusual that he didn't know the name of a client, but he

was accustomed to a certain amount of decorum, not just a note and a number. Forge knew what the number meant however. It was the pay being offered for his services, and it was quite a surprising number indeed. Surprising enough to get Forge out of his workshop, chasing down the mysterious address in this decrepit stretch of human wasteland even in spite of his trepidation. After all, Forge was a goblin.

He stopped walking and stared up at the number of the apartment next to him. He glanced across the street, furrowing his brow. The factory fence had ended half a block earlier. In its place was an empty lot, choked with weeds, blowing trash and broken bottles. An abandoned lorry leaned drunkenly in the corner, settling into the mud and tall grass. A wooden sign in the center of the lot had half fallen over. 'Future Home of Chimera Condominiums and Recreational Complex', it read in faded letters. Forge took his fist out of his pocket again and opened it. The address was gone from the parchment. Two new words spelled themselves out:

Turn around.

Forge dropped his fist to his side. He stared at the vacant lot, chewing his lips. Was he being warned to go back? Part of him hoped so, but he doubted it. Slowly, he turned around on the spot so that he stood in the center of the deserted street, looking up at the dark bulk of the apartment building. A broken window stared down at him like the eye of a skull. The wind gusted, lifting the curtains of the broken window, making them flutter. Forge sighed and looked down at the parchment again:

Walk. Backwards.

"Well," Forge muttered to himself, "in for a Knut, in for a Galleon." He began to walk backwards, lifting his boots carefully to avoid tripping over the curb or the piles of rotting trash. He stepped carefully onto the footpath and continued, feeling for the muddy weed bed of the vacant lot. The footpath seemed wider than he'd expected. Each step backwards found solid, smooth stone. Forge glanced down. There were worn, carefully laid flagstones beneath his boots instead of the rough cement slabs of the footpath. He looked up again and drew in a whistling breath. Two monstrous shapes leered down at him. They were gargoyles, each perched atop a stone pillar. Rain splattered and ran down their horrible faces. Between the pillars was a tall wrought-iron gate. As Forge watched, it swung shut with a rattling, resounding crash, closing him inside. He turned on the spot, his heart pounding, and saw that the wrought-iron formed a fence all around the lot. It was six feet tall and spiked with angry points. Nor was the lot any longer filled with trash. It was a lawn, carefully cropped, each blade of grass eerily sharp and exactly the same length as its fellows. The rain beaded on the grass like crystal. Where the abandoned lorry had stood was now a long, black carriage, immaculately shiny and covered with gothic scrollwork. There were no yokes for horses on the carriage. Forge shuddered, and then looked up toward the center of the lot.

In the place of the leaning sign was a house. It was not huge, but it was almost unnaturally tall. Its shuttered windows looked twenty feet high and the mansard roof that topped it almost seemed to rake outward, like a vulture brooding. Pillars framed the front door, which was painted black and had a giant brass door knocker in the center. Forge swallowed, drew himself up, and approached the door.

As he climbed the steps, Forge wasn't surprised to see that the brass door knocker had been crafted to resemble a coiled snake with glittering emerald eyes. Nor was he surprised to see it stir to life at his approach. The head rose from its brass coils and flicked a golden tongue.

"You bear the parchment?" the snake hissed.

"You best believe I do. Open the door before I catch my death in this rain."

"Sssshow ussss."

"I didn't come all this way to argue with a bit of enchanted metallurgy. Open the blasted door and tell your master I've arrived."

The snake's head rose very slightly so that it looked down at Forge's head. The eyes glowed green and the tongue flickered. "Sssshow ussss the parchment."

Forge looked up at the snake's head. It weaved slightly, flicking the air with its tongue. Forge had grown up with a metalsmith father and knew how enchanted ornaments were made. Even so, there was something about the weaving brass head and the flickering golden tongue that worried him. He stuffed his hand into the pocket of his coat and retrieved the parchment.

"Here. See?" he said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. "Now open the door."

The snake stretched out toward the parchment in Forge's hand. It reared, and then spat a bolt of green flame. Forge yanked his hand away, yelping as the flame consumed the parchment in midair. The snake's eyes glowed brighter as it uncoiled even further from the door, leaning out toward Forge's face. Forge wouldn't have thought it was possible, but the sculpture seemed to grin at him.

"Prosssscccceeed," it said. The door unlocked and swung ponderously open.

Forge entered slowly, peering around. He found himself in a long hallway, laid with rich, if rather threadbare, red carpet. There were thick doors on either side, lacquered to a mirror-black shine. All of them were closed except for the one at the very end. Voices came from beyond, echoing so that Forge couldn't quite understand them. He opened his mouth to announce himself when the door suddenly slammed shut behind him. Startled, he glanced back at it, his eyes wide, and then listened again. The voices were still speaking. The masters of the house must have heard the slam of the door; therefore, they must know he'd arrived. Water dripped steadily from the tail of Forge's overcoat as he walked quietly down the hall, toward the open door and the voices.

Beyond the door was another dark room. There was a bench along one side and a long, ornately framed mirror on the other. A second open door showed a corner of a third room. Forge thought it looked like a library. Firelight flickered on the walls and shadows moved. The voices had become more distinct.

"It is very dark," said a woman's raspy voice. "We are rather far away, my lord. It is impossible to be

certain."

"Pray do not say that," a man's voice replied. "'Impossible' is such a very… final word. Perhaps you would care to be a bit more nuanced, madam."

"Yes," the woman said quickly. "I err, my lord. Let me look again."

There was a stirring, as of someone moving in a large chair, and a different man's voice spoke impatiently, "Just tell us what you see, woman. We will decide what it is."

The woman moaned, either in fear or concentration. "There are three figures… small. They are… no, they are not small. They are young. One is larger, another is fair-haired. They are… there is commotion. Fighting."

Forge listened, unsure of what he was supposed to do. He looked around the darker antechamber of the library and saw a coat rack standing next to the door. He shrugged off his overcoat and hung it there. Water pattered from it to the wooden floor. Apparently, he was meant to wait until this current interview was over. He approached the bench but did not sit on it. In the mirror across from the bench, Forge could see a reflection of the library beyond the doorway. Three large chairs were turned to face the fireplace. He could only see their backs.

"There is another figure," the woman's voice rasped. "Thin and tall. A wraith, if I know my psychic signatures. The boys are fighting her. I see… I see a cloud of embers descending. I fear I am losing the vision…"

"Let me look," the impatient voice demanded.

"Be still, Gregor. Divination isn't your strong suit," the first voice said silkily. "Let the woman exercise her talents."

In the mirror, Forge saw a hand moving on the arm of one of the chairs. It was very white and had a large black ring on it. The shadow of the woman moved on the wall of the library. Forge recognized the stoop and hat of a hag. She was bent over her crystal ball.

"No…," the hag breathed, now lost in her work. "This is not the fog of distance or any sort of Confusion Hex. This is something else. Something is descending on the place. Something is… forming."

There was a tense silence. Forge felt it, and knew that the two men were listening very intently.

"The fight is done…," the hag said in a singsong voice, now completely immersed in her divination. "There is a ghost now as well… it is assisting the wraith… or perhaps it is the other way around. There is much conflict in the ether. But the fog has descended. It is forming… it is making a… a…"

The hag suddenly gasped. Forge saw her shadow lurch backwards, clapping her hands to her head.

There was clatter and a crash as something fell.

"Keep looking!" the impatient voice, Gregor, shouted. "Look and tell, or so help me…"

"Stop," the other man's voice said, almost playfully. There was a smile in it. "Gregor, leave the poor woman alone. Obviously, she has seen something that has upset her a great deal."

The hag was panting, and then, strangely, horribly, another voice spoke. It was very thin, high, cold, but nonsensical. Forge couldn't hear its actual words, but it seemed gleeful, somehow. The few remaining hairs at the base of Forge's neck stuck straight up.

"What did you see?" Gregor demanded, ignoring the thin, muttering voice. "What was it?"

"Let us not overtax the poor woman," the first voice said. "She has performed her services quite well. We shall see that she receives payment as agreed. Thank you, madam."

"It was a man," the hag panted, her voice trembling. "But then…"

"Yes, thank you," the man's voice said soothingly. "I believe we've heard enough. Gregor, perhaps you'd be so kind as to show our guest—"

"Horrible," she keened, and then sobbed hugely. Forge watched the hag's shadow dip, and then another shape, a fat man, jumped up, supporting her.

"Yes," the first voice said, dismissing her. "He was horrible, this man. Thank you."

"No!" the hag shouted. Forge saw her shadow lunge, pulling away from the shadow of Gregor. "Not the man! He was awful enough, but then…"

There was a pause as the hag seemed to crumple again. The white hand on the arm of the chair rose slightly. The black ring twinkled in the firelight. "And then?"

The hag shuddered. "Something else. Something… came through… it was…"

She didn't seem able to continue. The white hand on the arm of the chair remained still, poised in a gesture that looked almost like a benediction. Firelight flickered and snapped. The horrible, otherworldly voice buzzed and gibbered quietly to itself.

"Smoke," the hag finally said. Her voice had gone high, nearly falsetto. She sounded like a child. "Black fire. Ash and… and… eyes… and nothing. Living nothing."

There was a pause, and then the white hand closed into a loose fist. "Well," the first man's voice said casually, "that changes things a bit. Perhaps you should like to be paid here and now, madam. Tonight. Lemuel, please escort our guest… er… some place else, won't you? You'll find a proper place to pay her, I'm certain."

Shadows moved. A heretofore unseen figure arose and led the hag away from the firelight. Forge felt a sudden panic that they would come through the antechamber and find him, and then he remembered he was supposed to be here. They were expecting him. He wondered fleetingly if it was too late to sneak back out. Price or no price, this was looking to be a very bad group with which to get involved. To Forge's relief, Lemuel led the hag out through another door at the back of the library. Lemuel moved like a trained servant, though rather older than Forge had expected. The hag lolled as she walked, her eyes grey and blank. Neither of them paid Forge any mind.

"Then it is done," Gregor said as the rear door of the library closed. "Merlinus is returned. Your plan is complete."

"The plan is far from complete, but yes, up to this point, everything has proceeded as expected. The Delacroix woman will be disposed of. The Potter boy will be mortified to know that he was the tool to bring about our ends. And Merlinus Ambrosius is loosed upon the world yet again. But, Gregor, you should be careful in calling this my plan. You know whose design this is. I'll not take credit for the work of the Dark Lord."

Gregor ignored the rebuke. "How can we be certain that Merlin will be one of us?"

"We cannot. Merlin's loyalties never belonged to anyone but himself. This is why the Dark Lord was never interested in such an alliance while he was living. Merlin himself was never the prize, as you know."

Forge heard Gregor shift again in his seat. "Not everyone believes these tales," he said quietly.

"Only fools doubt the existence of the Otherworlds. Even the Muggles believe in Heaven and Hell. All that concerns us is that the Dark Lord believed in them. If he had not fallen, we would never have resorted to it. But even he saw the value of a fail-safe."

"Yes," Gregor replied. "The fail-safe. The Bloodline."

"No," the first voice said quietly. "The Bloodline is not yet perfect. It knows not who it is. Its power is undiscovered, divided, and dim. The Bloodline has not yet been sharpened by the gauntlet of death, as was the Dark Lord, its creator. It must be… refined."

"And this is the work of the Otherworlder?"

"Among other things."

Gregor sighed theatrically. "Even so, the faithful are scattered. Many are in Azkaban. More are dead. The dog, Fletcher, is in the custody of the Ministry. The Langlock Jinx silences him, and his identity is still undiscovered, but if your conspiracy crumbles, connections will be made. Potter will recognize him from his days with the Order. They will find a way to communicate with him. Sacarhina and Recreant will be incriminated first, but you will be next. After all, you were there with them in the cave of the throne. You yourself performed the curse upon them. Fletcher will betray you."

"Fletcher has nothing that the Ministry can use against us," the silky voice soothed. "Like all weak governments, they are far too enamored with their ideals of justice to be effective against a truly wily enemy. Potter will watch us when and where he can, but that is all. Let him. He believes the battle is over. He saw the Dark Lord cut down at his own thieving hand. And shall I shock you, my friend? Perhaps that was for the best. After all, the seed must die for the flower to blossom. Perhaps it was best that our Lord was cut down by the coward, Harry Potter. He and his allies have been lured these many years into a false sense of security. They believe that we, like them, are cowards, that we will not rise up again with vengeance in our hearts, stronger than ever. And let us not forget the legend, Gregor. We may indeed be the tools in the hand of our greatest forefather. It may well be our mission to close the circle of ancient revenge, a circle that was begun over a thousand years ago. My friend, I dare to suggest that the plan that was put into motion by the death of the Dark Lord may be even greater than his original intention. Given what we have discovered, I am certain that he would agree with me."

Gregor's shadow leaned forward. "Are you certain, my friend?"

"Call it an educated guess. After all, I was among his closest and most loyal servants. You know as well as I the… difficulties we face. For now."

There was a clink as Gregor reached for a wine glass. "Perhaps we shouldn't say any more in front of our guest."

"Ah, yes," the silky voice replied. "How insufferably rude of me to speak as if he were not here. Mr. Forge, do join us, won't you?"

Forge jumped. He'd become so transfixed by the conversation that he'd forgotten that they were waiting for him. He peeked around the door into the library. Firelight flashed along the edges of the leather chairs.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Forge," the silky voice said airily. The white hand beckoned. As it did, two of the three chairs began to turn. They revolved silently, as if on bearings, and Forge saw that they floated very slightly off the floor. "Tell me, my goblin friend, have you ever heard of the Transitus Nihilo?"

"No, sir," Forge said instantly, relieved that his voice didn't betray his nervousness. "I'm just a simple trade goblin. I don't know about any of these things. In fact, I'd be willing to wager that I'll forget every word you've said by the time I'm fifty steps from this house."

The chairs stopped turning and Forge saw the men sitting there. The one on the left had long whiteblonde hair framing a handsome, rather aged face. He was smiling disarmingly, as if inviting Forge to share a joke. The one on the right, Gregor, was fatter and red-cheeked, with the expression of long indulgence that belied a life of pureblood leisure.

"Fear not, my friend," the pale man said. "We crave your services rather more than your blood. Allow me to enlighten you. The Transitus Nihilo is the crossing place. It is the Void between our world and

the next. Tell me, you believe in the next world, don't you?"

"I'll believe in whatever you ask me to believe if it gets me back out your door in less than two pieces, my lord."

The man laughed. "That's what I love about goblins, Gregor. They are as candid as the day is long." He turned back to Forge. "I'll give you something else you might choose to believe in, my new friend. Our ancient forefathers believed that there was more to our world than that which we see and feel with our senses. They believed in the existence of unseen entities, beings greater than us, more powerful, immortal and inhuman. They exist not only in the beyond, but in the nothingness in between. They had words for them. I won't bother you with the names, for there were hundreds of them. But there was one being in particular that drew the interest of ambitious men. It is sometimes called the Gatekeeper, or the Being of Smoke and Ash. It does not break into our world, for it knows us not. It is made of the Void, it is our exact opposite; therefore, it neither suspects our existence, nor the existence of anything else. It is bound by its own perfect ignorance of us. And this, you think, is a good thing, yes, Mr. Forge?"

The goblin stood stiffly, staring into the man's bright eyes. He nodded.

"Yes, of course you do. Because a creature of such unadulterated inhumanity, such thoughtless power, if it were descended upon us, would be nothing less than the Destroyer, wouldn't it? Thus, it is a good thing that it is out there… and we are down here. Little children go to sleep each night understanding the truth of this: there are bad things lurking in the world, yes, but not the worst of things. It knows us not. And yet…" The man looked away for a moment, his eyes narrowed. "What if something made it aware of us? After all, we move in and out of the crossing place all the time, do we not? When we die, yes, we pass through. But when we perform certain kinds of magic, when we Disapparate, do we not also dip fleetingly into the Void? Fortunately, the Gatekeeper lives outside of time, so it does not notice our tiny, timebound existences. But what if one of us bent the rules just a bit? What if one of us, a particularly powerful one, stepped out of time and into the Void? What if one of us stayed there long enough for the Gatekeeper to take notice?"

The goblin hadn't been paying much attention, being rather preoccupied with doing whatever he needed to do to get out of the house alive, but suddenly he remembered the words of the hag: *Black fire. Ash… eyes… and nothing. Living nothing.*

"What have you done?" Forge asked quietly.

"Me?" the pale man replied, raising his eyebrows. "Not a thing. I'm just passing the time. Gregor here tends to believe in fantastic stories like this. It amuses him."

Gregor grunted and rolled his eyes. The horrible, mewling voice came again. It seemed to be coming from the chair that still faced the fire. Forge felt the skin of his scalp tighten. The voice was mad. It chilled him.

"But let us get down to business, as it were," the pale man continued. "Mr. Forge, we require your

services. We understand that you are a bit of an expert on, er, restoration. Would that be accurate?"

Forge shifted. "I am just a simple trade goblin, sir—"

"You are a master forger," the pale man said suddenly, his voice as cold as an ice pick. "Tell me you are. I'd hate to think that I've summoned you here in vain."

"Y-yes, sir," Forge answered quickly, trying not to tremble.

"Excellent," the pale man replied breezily, leaning comfortably back in his chair. "And I have come to understand that this expertise of yours extends to restoring portraits. Would that also be correct? Don't lie to me, Mr. Forge. I'll know."

Forge gulped and glanced at Gregor. The man seemed to be paying no attention. He stared idly at the wine in his glass as he swirled it.

"I… yes," Forge said. "It takes more time, of course. It isn't merely a matter of replacing the paint. The correct potions must be determined for each color… unimportant bits have to be scraped and reused to get the proper compositions… it's very delicate, but I have achieved a level of success."

"That's very fascinating," the pale man said, his blue eyes boring into the goblin. He's mad, Forge thought. Completely nutters. I wonder if the other one knows it. I wonder if they are both mad, but in different ways.

The pale man stood. "We have a job for you, Mr. Forge. It will be rather difficult, I am afraid, but I suspect a goblin of your obvious skills will find it a worthy challenge indeed. It is a priceless family heirloom, you see. For the longest time, we believed it was lost. Funny, isn't it, how things tend to turn up when you need them most? It's been rather dreadfully damaged by, er, vandals. But if there was anything you thought you could do to help, we'd be most eternally… grateful."

The thin voice was gibbering again as the pale man began to turn the middle chair. Suddenly, Forge absolutely did not want to see what was there. He wanted to run, or at least avert his eyes. He knew if he did, they would probably kill him. He watched and listened, and as the chair turned, the voice finally became intelligible.

"Show meee himmm!" it rasped in its awful, tiny, broken voice. "Show him meee!" And it began to laugh, high and crackling, a thoroughly mad, fragmented, twisted laugh.

The portrait was not large. It was almost entirely destroyed. Only a few shreds and scraps remained: the corner of the mouth, two fingers of a thin, pale hand, a single glittering red eye. It had been slashed. The back of the frame showed dozens of deep gouges and punctures.

"Make him repairrr meeee…," the portrait screamed in its thin, insectile voice. "Do it, Luciusssss! Make him repairrr meeeeee…"

"It will be his pleasure, my Lord," the pale man smiled, looking up at Forge, his eyes wet, glistening.

"M-my Lord?" Gregor said, as if shocked to hear the decimated portrait speak so clearly. "You remain! But we thought…"

"It matterssss not!" the portrait of Voldemort cried. "The Gatekeeper isss descended! The work of our forefather is at hand! Vennngeance!"

Gregor seemed hopelessly at a loss by this sudden change of events. "But… but how will we find it, my Lord?"

"Weeee will not…," the portrait hissed. The sound of its broken voice flapped a shred of the canvas. Forge dreaded the sight of the horrible thing, dreaded what they were going to make him do to it. But he dreaded most what he knew it was going to say next.

The painting sighed deeply and said, on the exhale, "It will find ussss…"

1. Endings and Beginnings

"Come on, James!" Albus cried, hopping impatiently. "Let me give it a try. Nobody will tell!" "You know I can't, you Skrewt," James replied calmly, swinging a leg over his Thunderstreak. "You're underage. You'll just have to learn in school like everybody else does." He kicked off, leaning forward so that the broom rocketed out over the garden.

"You just want me to look as much a fool as you did on a broom *your* first year!" Albus called, running after his brother. "It won't work! I'm gonna be brilliant! I'll fly circles around you, you watch!"

James smiled as the wind whipped through his hair. He pulled up and banked, circling back toward Albus. Albus stopped, frowning, and ducked as James flew past, tousling his younger brother's hair. James hugged his broom and climbed into a streaking corkscrew, pulling up into the blue dome of the sky. Below, the Burrow spun lazily, casting its shadow out over the garden and the nearby fields. James drew a deep breath of the rushing air, and then dipped his broom, pulling it to a sudden, practiced stop. He knew he shouldn't show off in front of his brother, but he was quite proud of his increasing skills. His dad had been working with him over the summer, and James had become cautiously confident that he'd make the House team this year after all.

"About time, Potter," Ted called, swinging in next to James on his old but well-maintained Nimbus 2000. "Three-on-three is hard enough, even with experienced players. You'll need to play Beater and Seeker. Just keep an eye on Angelina. She'll let you think she's delicate as a flower until she drafts you into a tree. George is playing Beater and Keeper as well, so he'll be plenty busy, but his long-range Bludger will still find you if you don't watch it. But the one you've really got to keep an eye on is—"

Something red and green roared between Ted and James, forcing them into opposite tumbles. James gripped his broom and swung it around, craning to look. His mum spun to a stop and drifted gently over him, grinning, her cheeks flushed and her hair pulled back in a neat ponytail. She was wearing her Holyhead Harpies tunic.

"What do you think, James? Still fits!"

James heard the sound of an appreciative whistle behind him. He looked and saw his dad smiling at Ginny, pulling his broom into position thirty feet away.

"Dad! Mum!" James reproached, stifling a grin. "Quit it! You're both an embarrassment!"

Ginny blew a stray hair out of her face. "You just watch your back out there, love. I may be your mum, but that doesn't mean I won't broadside you to get to the Snitch." She grinned at him, and then spun on her broom and zoomed to the opposite side of the pitch.

"She's not serious," James said, turning to Ted.

"You better hope not," Ted answered, watching Ginny fly off. "I've played against her before, and I tend to think your only hope is that she won't Bludger her own son in the back of the head."

"You're a great help," James said, but Ted had already dropped back into formation.

"Knock James off his broom, Mum!" Albus yelled from below. James glanced down and saw him standing at the edge of the orchard. Nearby, Lily, Rose, and Hugo sat on a huge tartan blanket, grinning and squinting up into the sunlight. Charlie's twins, Harold and Jules, were perched in a gnarled old oak tree by the barn.

Rose nudged Lily with her elbow. "Go for it, Aunt Ginny! Knock him flying! You can always have another kid! One with better manners and less stinky feet!"

"I heard that!" James called down.

"I should hope so," Rose said primly, putting her fists on her hips and smiling coquettishly. Lily giggled.

"Enough, Rose," Aunt Hermione admonished from a deck chair at the edge of the garden.

"I'd play on your team, Harry, if I could," Ron yelled from the chair next to her. "But three-on-three's the tradition. Maybe somebody will get hurt enough not to play and I'll be able to sub in, eh?"

Hermione grimaced and scowled at him.

"What? A guy can hope, can't he?" Ron protested. He looked back up at Harry. "Looks like we'll have to host an all-out tournament by next year!"

Harry nodded. "None of us were kidding when we said we wanted to have enough kids to make a Quidditch team, were we?" he called back.

Charlie stood in the center of the garden, below the players. He had one foot on the family's bedraggled old Quidditch trunk. He held a Quaffle, yellow with age and grass-stained, in his right hand.

"The Annual Weasley Family Quidditch Match is now underway!" he boomed, grinning. "I want to see a mean match. I want to see plenty of blagging, loads of bumphing, and a good bit of blatching. Any player not bloody by the end of the match will be deemed unfit to remain a Weasley and will have to defect to the Potters. Understood?"

"Throw the Quaffle or get on a broom, Freckles!" Harry yelled, resulting in a round of laughter and catcalls. Charlie grinned crookedly.

"Ball up!" he shouted, lobbing the Quaffle and releasing his foot from the Quidditch trunk. The lid exploded open and the balls soared into the air.

James gulped, gripped his broom, and lunged into the fray.

Technically, it wasn't James' first Quidditch match. He'd played several matches over the summer with whoever happened to be around. Granted, most of them had been two-on-two matches, sometimes using 'ghost players', which Ted provided from a small box he'd bought from George. Apparently, it was a Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes test product. When the tiny wooden box was opened, it released four Boggarts, all of which had been specially hexed to only take the shapes of famous dead Quidditch players. They looked extremely convincing even if they were a bit transparent. The problem was that the Boggarts didn't have the slightest idea how to play Quidditch; thus, despite their impressive appearance, they tended to simply swoop randomly over the pitch, their arms in the air, making ghostly noises. Also, Bludgers flew right through them.

"Still," George had concluded, "they do add a certain something to a match lacking the right number of players, don't they?"

None of the matches James had taken part in that summer compared to this, however. Not only did the Weasleys tend to be fiercely competitive, but all the players knew each other eerily well. This was sometimes a benefit, such as when George ducked beneath a Bludger and lobbed the Quaffle over his head, knowing Angelina would be directly behind him to swat it into the goal with her Beater club. It was also sometimes a dread drawback, such as when Ginny predicted Ted's favorite maneuver and plucked the Quaffle from beneath his arm the very moment he swooped to score. Despite the fervor of the match, there was plenty of laughter and hearty encouragement on all sides. James knew he'd probably influence the match very little. He was mostly concerned with staying on his broom and not letting his own mum make a complete fool out of him in front of Rose and the rest. To his great pleasure, however, he did manage a few lucky swats with his club, sending the old Bludgers careening into the fracas and even occasionally striking their marks. One of them caromed off of George's broomtail, sending him into a wild, momentary spin. When he recovered, he glanced back at James and gave him a huge, toothy grin.

"Look at James!" he called to the other players. "Giving the 'old guard' a warning shot! Next one will be my head, eh, James? Nice shot!" And he dove back into the melee.

Ron couldn't help jumping up and down at the edge of the pitch, shouting instructions and warnings

through cupped hands.

"Dragon formation!" he bellowed furiously. "Dragon formation, George at the wing! Harry's left is weak since that hit with Angelina! They've no defence against it! Ginny, you're drifting to the right! Fix your tail! Your tail! Oh, come down here and give me your broom!"

Right next to him, Albus matched him shout for shout, sometimes shoving his uncle aside with both hands. "They're planning a Waterloo Skidoo, Dad! Stack up and plow the center! Ted! Mum's stopped to fix her broomtail! She's exposed! Forget she's a girl and Bludger her back to the Stone Age!"

Hermione had moved to the blanket to sit with Fleur. The two of them were pointedly ignoring the match, lost in their own animated conversation.

And then, just as the sun was beginning to redden, James caught a flash of gold flickering near the fifth story of the Burrow. He glanced around, opening his mouth to alert the Seeker, and then remembered *he* was playing Seeker. His heart trip-hammered and he lunged forward, touching his chin to his broom handle. He shot forward, banking around Angelina and a wildly spinning Bludger. The rickety walls of the Burrow swayed in front of him, its windows winking daggers of burnished sunlight at him, half blinding him. There it was again, the flash of gold, darting through a stand of birch trees at the corner. James leaned, and the Thunderstreak responded with perfect control, ticking down and to the right, homing in on the Snitch. He strained forward, nearly climbing off the end of his broom, and reached for the tarnished golden ball.

The Snitch suddenly bobbed upwards, just over James' reaching hand. He shot under it, swore loudly, and then tucked his head as he whipped through the branches of the birch trees. They tore at him, but he barely noticed. He leaned so hard that he nearly fell off his broom, slewing to a halt and craning his head back to find the Snitch. The setting sun dazzled his eyes. James squinted and saw the tiny golden form of the Snitch. It hung in the air near the corner of the Burrow's roof, bobbing in the air like a bumblebee. A darker shape appeared behind it, blocking the sun. It was Ginny. She saw the Snitch, and then saw James. She grinned, and hugged her broom, rocketing forward.

"Oh no you don't!" James growled. He lunged, forcing himself to keep his eyes on the Snitch and not to check to see where his mum was. The Snitch seemed to sense the pursuit. It zigged out over the pitch, threading through the players. James hugged his broom, willing it to go even faster, and was suddenly reminded that the Thunderstreak was equipped with a rudimentary ability to read its owner's mind. It leapt forward, faster than James had ever gone before. He dipped under Ted and his dad, who had noticed the Snitch flash past them. James heard them cheering him on raucously. A shadow fell over the end of his broom and James couldn't help glancing up. His mum was directly over him, swooping toward the Snitch, her tunic flapping. James did the first thing that occurred to him. Suddenly, wildly, he steered to the left, away from the Snitch, still reaching forward as if to grab it. Instantly, he corrected and threw himself forward on his broom. It had worked! He sensed the movement over him as Ginny feinted left, believing James had seen the Snitch move aside. She'd been watching him rather than the Snitch itself! The Snitch didn't dodge away from him this time. He strained forward, brushed it with his fingers as it flew, and then clamped his hand on it. The wings

buzzed against his palm for a moment before going still. The game was over.

James turned on his broom exultantly, holding the Snitch over his head. Far behind him, Harry and Ted threw their hands into the air. They were shouting at him. A second later, James realized they weren't celebrating. They were making warning signs. James hadn't stopped his broom. He whipped around to see where he was going just as the gnarled apple tree at the back of the pitch loomed over him. The breath socked out of him as a branch swept him from his broom. There was a sickly sensation of weightlessness, and then he thumped to the ground.

"Ooh," he moaned. Running footsteps approached and a moment later his mum was kneeling over him.

"James! Tell me you're all right!" she commanded. Lily peered in next to her, her eyes wide.

"He's all right, everybody," Ted said as he landed nearby, laughing. "He only dropped eight feet. Besides, all those rotten apples broke his fall."

James sat up and felt the sticky mush of a dozen rotten apples plastered to his back. He moaned and shook his head, flinging gobbets of apple pulp from his hair.

"Gah!" Lily cried, sputtering. "Warn me next time you do that, idiot!"

Suddenly, James remembered the Snitch. He glanced down at it in his hand, and then showed it to his mum. A huge grin broke out on his face.

Ginny smiled down at him crookedly. "Nicely done, son. Just don't expect to beat me twice."

"Did we win, then?" James asked as Ginny gave him her hand and pulled him to his feet.

"I hear Albus and your uncle arguing about it even as we speak, but I'd guess you did."

In the near distance, James heard Ron and Albus heatedly arguing the final score.

"Excellent grab, James," Harry said to his son, brushing rotten apple off the back of James' shirt as they returned to the Burrow.

"Yeah," Ted agreed happily, "great use of the old dodge and feint. I was sure your mum was gonna beat you to the gold, but you really took the biscuit, didn't you?"

"I'll say," George said sourly, turning and walking backwards so as to glare pointedly at Ginny, his broom slung over his shoulder. "In fact, if I recall correctly, I think it was a member of this very family that invented that maneuver."

Ginny looked innocently at her brother. "I haven't the faintest idea what you mean, George."

"No? Hmm! Well, if I remember right—and I do—the Harpies' announcers used to call it the 'Ginevra Gambit'. Funny thing, you falling for a maneuver named after you, isn't it? Right suspicious, in fact."

Ginny simply shrugged and smiled. George continued to walk backwards, fuming at her. Finally, Angelina tripped him.

"James, why don't you go gather your brother and cousins for dinner?" Harry said, ruffling his son's hair. "Your grandfather will be home soon and we all want to be there for the big surprise."

"Now look what you did, Dad," James said, trying to matt his hair back down. "I look like an old picture of you."

"That rotten apple's even better than Hermione's hair gel goo," Ted commented. "You should tell her about it. Ron says she spends more money on Muggle hair potions than she does on food."

"What?" Hermione shrilled, bumping Ron with her hip. "You did not!"

James didn't wait for the rest. He tossed his Thunderstreak to his dad and turned toward the sound of his cousins' voices.

"Hey, it's almost dinner, you lot," he called as he entered the shadow of the Weasley family's small stone garage. As always, the doors were thrown wide open. The cool, familiar smell of the dirt floor and dusty shelves surrounded him. He sighed happily.

"Nice grab, James!" the twins, Harold and Jules, called in unison as James approached.

"Thanks!"

"Too bad you spoiled it by getting intimate with an apple tree," Rose said from where she sat, kicking her legs idly. "What a downer."

"Hey," James said, ignoring Rose's remarks. "That's Merlin's car! What's it doing here?"

Rose glanced down at the bonnet of the car she was sitting on. The old Anglia had been meticulously cleaned and was half-repainted, but one headlight still hung askew from its socket. "This isn't Merlin's, you nitwit," Rose chided. "It's Grandfather's. Don't you remember the stories about the flying Ford? Your dad and my dad took it for a joyride back when they were in school. They ended up losing it in the Forbidden Forest. All Merlin did was find it. When he discovered whose it was, he arranged to have it returned here. Grandfather's been getting it back into shape over the summer."

"He's making some pretty keen modifications to it too!" Hugo announced, popping his head out the driver's side window. "Watch this!"

He disappeared again and the car rocked a bit as he and Albus moved around in the front seat.

"That's probably not a good idea—" James began, and then jumped back as a pair of wood and canvas wings shot out of the sides of the automobile, squeaking and ratcheting as they unfolded. They began to flap up and down violently, making the entire car bounce and rock. A moment later, they

screeched to a stop.

"It's a good thing you know how to turn those off!" James exclaimed, his eyes wide.

"I didn't!" Albus answered, working buttons and levers on the car's dashboard. "They stopped on their own. Looks like they aren't quite finished yet. I hope we didn't break them. Hey, Hugo, climb back there and jump on them a little, why don't you?"

"No, let us!" the twins cried, scrambling toward the wings.

"No!" James called, throwing up his hands. "Nobody jump on anything! Granddad will leather you with a hex if you break his stuff!"

Hugo scowled, ignoring James. "Too bad Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey aren't here. Lucy's the mechanical one. I bet she could get this thing in the air."

"I wonder why it needs the wings anyway," Rose commented. "I thought it flew on its own."

"Uncle Harry smashed it into the Whomping Willow at Hogwarts, remember?" Hugo called out. "Totally crippled it. That's why it ran off into the Forest and turned all feral."

"You've got it all wrong," Albus said. "Your dad was driving. If my dad had been behind the wheel, they'd have made a four-point landing."

"Yeah," Rose agreed, "probably right through the windows of the Great Hall."

The twins guffawed and ran around the car, pretending to fly and crash. Harold mimicked the Whomping Willow, thrashing at his brother, who feigned death and keeled over.

"Anyway," Hugo continued, "everybody knows about the Alma Alerons and their flying cars. I bet Granddad wanted to see if he could make this fly even better."

James grinned. "Come on, you lot. He'll be home soon. If we don't get inside, we'll miss the surprise."

"And the cake," Rose added.

That got their attention. Jules and Harold spun on their heels and darted past James, yelling and trying to push each other out of the way. Albus shrugged and followed Hugo out the driver's door of the car. Rose slid off the bonnet and brushed the dust from her bottom with her hands.

"Grandfather's quite peculiar, isn't he?" she said, glancing around at the Anglia and the collection of mismatched Muggle objects that filled the shelves nearby. James had seen them a hundred times, but there were always a few new things. He followed Rose as she approached the collection and ran her hand lightly over some of the items, drawing lines in the dust with her fingers. Alongside the assortment of batteries and electric can openers, extension cords and nose hair trimmers, James saw the newer additions. There was an old laptop computer, a video game controller, and a digital alarm

clock in the shape of a cartoon character.

"Why do you suppose he loves all this stuff so much?" Rose asked.

"I don't know," James said. "I think part of it is because he grew up a wizard, not like us. My dad grew up with Muggles. Your mum too. They brought a bit of the Muggle world with them, so to us, it's no mystery. But for Granddad, the Muggle world is as foreign as aliens would be to us. He just loves figuring out how it all works, and what they use it for."

"He could just take a Muggle Studies course, nowadays, couldn't he?" Rose said as the two of them turned toward the door. "They didn't have classes like that when he was a kid."

James shrugged. "I guess so. I don't think he wants to learn it like that though. That's not the point for him. I don't really know what he thinks the point is though."

Rose tilted her head. "He just loves the mystery of it, don't you think?"

"Well, what's the point of a mystery if you never find out?" James frowned.

"You're such a boy, James. The moment the mystery is solved, it's not a mystery anymore."

"Granddad's a boy too, you know."

"No, Grandfather's a man."

James rolled his eyes. "What's the difference, then?"

Rose sniffed. "Well, a man can catch the Snitch and *not* come out smelling like a rancid cider house."

James chased her the rest of the way to the back door.

Inside, Grandma Weasley was frantically arranging the final details as the family milled around, mostly trying to stay out of her way.

"Hugo! Dominique! You get your fingers away from that cake this moment!" she admonished as she passed by the table, her arms full of plates and cutlery. "Fleur, would you be a dear and help me with the pudding? It's Arthur's favorite and I want it right in the middle of the table. Oh, when did this family become so large that we can't eat indoors without sitting on each other's laps?"

"It's your fault entirely, Mum," George said reasonably. "You can't go having seven kids and not expect the lot of us to see it as a dare to have more."

"Don't you start," Angelina said, grimacing and throwing an arm around his neck.

"You knew what you were getting into when you got engaged to me," George replied airily. "The thing I love best about you is your childbearing hips."

Angelina tightened her grip around his neck, dragging him into the parlor where everyone was gathering.

"How'd the match go, James?" Bill asked from his seat next to his son Louis.

James shrugged and grinned. "Pretty good. Nobody got killed. I caught the Snitch."

Louis smiled crookedly. "Rose told us all about it already."

James rolled his eyes as Bill laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Oh! Arthur will be here any moment!" Molly fretted, wringing her hands on her apron and glancing around at her gathered family. "I just know I'm forgetting something. He's so dreadfully hard to surprise. James! You didn't change your shirt! You're covered with rotten apple! No! Don't sit on the sofa! It's too late now to do anything about it, I suppose…"

"Mum," Charlie soothed, "calm down. It's a birthday party, not a military campaign."

She heaved a quick sigh, letting Charlie massage her shoulders for a moment. "All I can say is it's a good thing he agreed to that consultant position at the Ministry. At least it gets him away from the Burrow a few times a week. Otherwise, I'd never have got him out of the place long enough to arrange such a thing. Especially since that Merlin character returned that awful car… Oh! That's what I forgot! Ronald! Do you have the—"

"Socket wrench set," Ron nodded wearily. "Fresh from the Muggle hardware store. All wrapped and on the table along with everyone else's gifts. He'll love it, Mum. Calm down or George and I will have to break out the Firewhisky."

"Shh!" James' mum hissed, looking hard at the fireplace. "Here he comes!"

She leaned in, gripping Harry's arm and pulling him with her. The room fell silent as everyone drew their breath, preparing to shout.

The ash in the fieldstone fireplace swirled, and then suddenly erupted into flame. It flared, and a figure materialized out of it, plopping onto the floor in front of the grate with a practiced hop.

"Surprise--" everyone shouted, but the strength of the shout faded on the second syllable. The new arrival wasn't Arthur Weasley. There was a sudden, awkward silence as everyone stared at the unexpected form of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Kingsley's face was grave. He looked over the room, scanning faces, until he saw Molly.

"Oh no," Molly said simply.

Kingsley's face didn't change. Together, both he and Molly looked aside, toward the Weasley family clock.

"Oh no!" Molly said again. She slowly raised her right hand to her mouth, her eyes wide, shining.

Everyone in the room looked toward the magical clock, the clock that showed every Weasley family member's whereabouts and well-being. Most of the family members' hands were pointed toward The Burrow: *Parlor*. Arthur Weasley's hand of the clock was pointed straight down, toward two small red words.

No More.

"Arthur Weasley was among the rarest and most honorable of men," Kingsley said in his calm, measured voice. "With those whom he loved, he was faultlessly gentle, loyal, and wise. With those who deserved his ire, he was fair, unflagging, and when necessary, fierce. Few who grew up with him would ever have guessed that this soft-spoken, even comical man would someday face the greatest enemies of his time. And yet he did, firmly, and with the kind of quiet courage that comes only from loving well, and being wellloved."

James sat in the second row, between Albus and Lily. He stared furiously at Kingsley's face as he spoke, concentrating on the words, trying very hard not to look at the shiny wooden box behind the big man. The lid was open, showing a snowy white, cushioned interior. Next to James, Lily sniffed quietly and leaned against her mother's shoulder. Albus sat ramrod straight, his face blank and pale. The tiny church at Ottery St. Catchpole was packed and hot.

"During Arthur's lifetime," Kingsley went on, "he saw both great and horrible things. In his family, he witnessed the purest of delights, and more importantly, was the sort of man who knew how to enjoy them. He also faced the most terrible of trials and endured the greatest sacrifices. And yet his heart was pure enough to not become embittered by them. Hatred had no foothold in this man. Viciousness knew him not. Corruption could not bend him."

Dimly, James was aware of the many family members and friends who'd travelled from far and wide to be present. He'd seen Hagrid come in, and even now he could hear the half-giant blowing his nose in the row behind him. Luna was there along with her skinny new beau, Rolf Scamander, who in his brown suit and huge glasses looked, to James, vaguely like a human version of one of those insects cleverly disguised by nature to resemble a dried stick. Neville Longbottom was present as well as the Diggorys, who lived nearby in the village. A surprising number of Granddad's co-workers from the Ministry had also come, most straight from London.

Directly in front of James sat his grandmother. Molly's shoulders shook, but she made no sound. Next to her, Bill put his arm around her. His eyes glistened. He frowned very slightly as Kingsley went on.

"There are men who devote their lives to fairness, who study, and campaign, and lead charges. There are men who seek power and influence, who arise to positions of great authority and make momentous decisions. And there are men who devote their lives to training for war, whose skills with the wand and the sword are legendary, who are the first into battle and the last to retreat. Arthur Weasley was not any of these men. He was better. His benevolence had no root in guilt. His position was not born of pride. And his fight was not for the sake of glory. In his steadfast heart, he was effortlessly what most of us try to be by sheer willpower. He was a man without guile. A man of duty and loyalty. A man with the strength of right, and love. But mostly, Arthur Weasley… was a father… and a husband… and a friend."

For the first time, Kingsley lowered his eyes. He pressed his lips together, and then removed his glasses. Still looking down at the small podium before him, he concluded:

"Arthur Weasley was the best of his kind. And we shall miss him."

In the silence that followed, James fought back his tears. It was so confusing. When he'd first understood what was happening that afternoon as they'd all stood in the parlor looking at Granddad's hand on the Weasley clock, he'd felt strangely numb. He'd known he should've felt sorrow, or anger, or fear, but instead, he'd felt just a strange, ringing emptiness. As the family had dissolved into confused conversation— demands of explanations, expressions of grief—Harry had taken Lily, Albus, and James upstairs to the bedroom they'd so often shared.

"Do you understand what this means?" he had asked them, looking each one in the eyes, his face serious and sad. Lily and Albus had nodded dumbly. James hadn't nodded. If he'd understood what had happened to Granddad, he'd have felt something, wouldn't he? Harry had gathered all three of them into an embrace, and James could feel his dad's cheek on his shoulder. It had felt hot.

Now, as James watched his grandma and Uncle Bill approach the casket, he could barely grope around the edges of this sudden, monumental grief. His throat ached from holding it in. His eyes burned and he blinked yet again, forcing back the tears. He was ashamed to let it all out, and yet it felt wrong to hold it in. He was torn in the middle.

Why did Granddad have to die of a stupid heart attack, of all things? Great wizards just didn't die of such things, did they? This was the man who'd faced Voldemort's snake and survived to tell of it. How could a man who'd fought the most vicious villains of all time, who'd made such terrible sacrifices, have died so stupidly in the end? The unfairness of it was like a weight of stones on James' heart. Hadn't Granddad earned a reprieve from something like this? Didn't he deserve at least a few more years to watch his grandchildren grow up? He was going to miss James' first year on the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He'd not attend George's and Angelina's wedding, nor know the names of their children. He'd never unwrap his Muggle socket wrench set, never use it to finish the homemade wings on his prize Ford Anglia. It would sit there in the garage, half-painted and with one headlight still hanging out, until it rusted and lost whatever soul Granddad had given it. Nobody else cared about it. Eventually, it would be towed away somewhere and disposed of. Buried.

At the end of the aisle, Harry stood up, helping Ginny to her feet. Lily and Albus stood as well, but James remained seated. He stared straight ahead, his cheeks burning. He simply couldn't do it. After a moment, Ginny led Albus and Lily up the aisle to the casket. James felt his dad sit back down next to him. Neither tried to talk to each other, but James felt a hand on his back. It comforted him a little. But just a little.

A few minutes later, the room was almost entirely empty. James blinked and looked around. He'd barely noticed everyone trickling away, heading outside into the blinding summer sun. Harry still sat next to him. James glanced up at him, studying his dad's face for a moment, and then lowered his eyes. Together, they stood and walked up the aisle.

James had never been to a funeral before, but he'd heard about one. Albus' namesake, Dumbledore the Headmaster, had meant a terrible lot to his dad. He'd heard about how, at Dumbledore's funeral, Fawkes the phoenix had suddenly flown overhead and the tomb had briefly, gloriously, burst into flames. As James approached his granddad's casket, he wished something like that would happen. James hadn't known Dumbledore, but how could that old man have been nobler than his granddad? Why wouldn't something glorious and beautiful like that happen for Arthur Weasley? And yet, sadly, James knew it wouldn't.

He climbed the steps to the casket and looked in. He couldn't have done it if his dad hadn't been there with him, with his big hand on James' shoulder. Granddad looked the same, but different. His face was wrong, somehow. James couldn't see specifically what it was, and then he realized: Granddad was just dead. That's all. Suddenly, shockingly, a memory leapt into James' head. In it, he saw Granddad sitting on a stool out in the old family garage, holding a much younger James on his knee, showing him a toy aeroplane. He held it up in front of young James' wondering eyes and made it fly back and forth over the workbench, imitating jet noises. James hadn't known it at the time, but he saw it now in his memory: Granddad was making the plane fly backwards, tail-first. He smiled down at the boy James, his eyes twinkling. "It's like a broom with a hundred Muggles in it," he said, chuckling. "You know, I've never actually seen one fly. I hope to someday, James, my boy. I truly do."

James closed his eyes as hard as he could, but it was no use. He sobbed a great, dry sob and leaned on the edge of the casket. Harry Potter put an arm around his son's shoulder and held him tightly, rocking him slowly while he cried, hopelessly and helplessly, like the child that he still was.

"It wasn't really his birthday, of course," Molly was saying to Audrey, Percy's wife, as they stood in the sunlight of the Burrow's backyard, punch glasses in their hands. "He was actually born in February. This was going to be his seventy-eighth-and-a-half birthday party, more or less. Why, it was the only way we could surprise him! Of course, I should've known that he'd find a way to have

the last laugh, God bless him. Oh Audrey."

James ladled himself a glass of punch and moved away from the table, not wishing to hear any more. Hagrid was seated rather uncomfortably on one of the tiny lawn chairs, pressing it into the ground.

"I knew Arthur back when he was still in school, yeh know," Hagrid said to Andromeda Tonks, who was seated at the table with him. "Never knew of a gentler soul, did I. Always ready with a smile an' a story. An' sharp in 'is own way. Sharp as a talon."

James slipped past as inconspicuously as possible. He loved Hagrid, but he felt weary and washed out from his tears back at the church. He didn't think he could bear hearing any stories about his granddad as a young man just now. It was too sad.

He saw Rose, Albus, and Louis seated at one of the portable tables at the edge of the lawn and went to join them.

"I hear Grandmother might sell the Burrow," Louis said as James pulled over a chair.

"She can't do that," Rose said, shocked. "It's been the Weasley home since… since… well, since I don't know how long, but since before our parents were even born! It's like a part of the family!"

Louis shrugged. "Dad says it's too big for her to manage all alone. I mean, the place is seven stories tall, not even counting the attic and the cellar. Besides, it takes a lot of magic just to keep the place upright. Now that the kids are all moved out, and Grandfather gone, it's just too much work for her all by herself."

"It just doesn't seem right," Rose insisted, kicking the table leg. She glanced up, widening her eyes. "So why shouldn't somebody just move back in with her? George could bring Angelina here when they get married, couldn't he?"

James glanced out over the yard at the knot of family and friends milling morosely in the sun. "George can't stay at the Burrow," he said. "He has the shops to run. Besides, Angelina's taking a tutoring job in Hogsmeade. They're looking at renting a flat just down the street from the shop."

"I hear Ted is going to live in the upstairs part," Louis said, brightening. "He wants to try out for the National Quidditch Team, so George said he could live with them and work at the shop while he trains."

"He can't be serious," Rose grimaced. "Ted's all right, but does he really think he can make the national team?"

Louis shrugged again. "Mum says it's a mistake for George to take him in. She says that Ted just doesn't know what to do with himself and that he should just buck up and find some regular work."

"Aunt Fleur thinks that about pretty much everybody," Rose commented.

"Are you two looking forward to starting school next week?" James said before Louis could reply.

"Is the main ingredient of Halflinger Root potion Halflinger Root?" Rose said, sitting up excitedly.

James blinked. "I assume the answer to that is 'yes'."

"The new Headmaster's made some changes since last year, you know," Louis pointed out. "No more sharing dorms between different years. Much more regulated class schedules. No more putting off secondary classes until your last year. He pretty much completely wiped out the changes made by that guy that was Headmaster before McGonagall. Tyram Wossname."

"I kind of liked having some of the other years in my dorm last year," James muttered.

"Yeah, well, Mum says it was Tyram's 'forward-thinking' business that led to the Progressive Element and all this reforming Voldemort rubbish," Louis said wisely, raising his eyebrows.

James didn't have a response to that. He wasn't surprised in the least, however, that Merlin had made some very conscious choices to take Hogwarts back to its pre-battle standards and procedures.

"What house do you think we'll get into, James?" Rose asked. "Dad thinks I'll be a Gryffindor, but what would you expect from him? Personally, I hope I get into Ravenclaw."

"I haven't the faintest idea what houses you'll be sorted to," James said. "The Sorting Hat itself doesn't even seem to know until it sits on your head. I wouldn't be surprised if it takes one look at you and throws eleven O.W.L.s at you."

Rose arranged the napkin on the table in front of her. "Just because I'm my mum's daughter, doesn't mean I'm some unnatural genius, you know."

"No," Louis agreed. "But the fact that you've read the entire Encyclopaedia of Magical Poisons and Antidotes and can actually remember the exact page number for Barglenarf salve… does."

"That didn't actually happen!" Rose insisted, her cheeks going red. "Mum's been telling that story for months and it's pure rot. She bought me those encyclopaedias for my tenth birthday, for Merlin's sake. The only reason I read them at all is because I wanted to learn how to make the Draught of… er…"

Louis smiled politely and raised his eyebrows. "The Draught of…?"

"Well, it hardly matters," Rose said stiffly, still fiddling with her napkin. "But I simply can't help it if I have a mind for details. Besides, it was just a cure for poison ivy. And I didn't remember the exact page. Just the chapter it was in."

"Well, that's different, then," Louis replied sardonically.

"Don't try that expression on me," Rose said, throwing the napkin at him and hitting him in the face. "Nobody does it like Aunt Fleur. She was practically born with that look on her face."

"Well, I expect to get into Hufflepuff," Louis said, tossing the napkin back to Rose and trying to look composed. "It's the house most known for diligence and hard work. I plan to take school very seriously."

Rose rolled her eyes and soundlessly mimicked Louis' words. James smiled.

"What about you, Albus?" Louis said, nudging James' brother.

Albus sat back and glanced around. "What's it matter, really?"

"What does it matter?" Louis repeated incredulously. "It's only the single most defining thing about your school life. I mean, what if you get sorted into the wrong house?"

"And what house would that be?" Albus asked pointedly.

"Well, I don't know," Louis answered, throwing up his hands. "It's different for everybody, isn't it?"

"Albus Severus Potter," Rose said meaningfully. "Louis hasn't figured it out, yet. So much for diligence and hard work."

Louis frowned at Rose. "I figured out Albus' full name quite a few years ago, thanks."

"It's his initials, you git," Rose said primly. "A. S. P. An asp is a kind of snake."

"So what's that supposed to mean, then?"

"Albus is afraid he'll get sent to the Slytherins," James said, rolling his eyes. "It's been a bit of a family joke for some time. First Potter to go to the snakes."

"Oh shut up, why don't you?" Albus said dourly.

"What?" James replied. "It's possible, you know. I almost got sent there myself."

"Yeah, that's what you keep saying," Albus said quietly. "But then, glory be, you ended up in Gryffindor. The first-born son of Harry Potter goes to his dear old dad's house. Who'd've thought it?"

"It's true, Al. But come on, Slytherin can't be all that bad anymore," James reasoned. "Ralph's there, and he's all right. Maybe you can join forces with him and turn the old Slytherin legends inside out, eh?"

Albus scowled, leaned forward, and rested his chin on his forearm.

"Green really is your color, Albus," Rose said thoughtfully. "Goes with your eyes and your darker hair."

"Yeah," Louis chimed in, "and I hear their dormitories have hot and cold running dragon's blood."

Albus suddenly stood and skulked away from the table as the others watched. Rose glanced aside at Louis, one eyebrow raised.

"What?" he said defensively. "It was the best thing I could think of. Hot and cold running… you know, they say Slytherin families hunt dragons." He rolled his eyes. "Never mind, it's probably over your head."

"It's unwise to believe everything you hear," a voice said from directly behind them. James turned and looked up into the face of a man with pale skin and sharp features. A dark-haired woman stood next to him.

The man smiled tightly. "Please forgive the interruption. I was about to ask if this was the correct home, but I see the evidence right here in front of me. I cannot but assume I am speaking to Mr. James Potter, yes?"

James nodded, looking back and forth between the man and the dark-haired woman. They were both good-looking in a rather cold way, and both were dressed in very tasteful black. James was suddenly sure that if Zane, his American friend, were present, he'd make some comment about how brave it was for them to be out in the daylight, or how they managed to comb their hair so nicely, not being able to see themselves in mirrors. Needless to say, he was quite glad Zane wasn't present.

"Perhaps," the man went on, "you'd be kind enough to direct me to your father, James. My name is—"

"Draco?"

James glanced aside and saw his mum approaching slowly. She looked at the newcomer with a mixture of disbelief and caution.

"Ginny," the man said. There was a long, uncomfortable pause, and then the dark-haired woman spoke.

"We're very sorry for your loss, Mrs. Potter." She tried to smile, but it was a rather strained attempt.

"Does Harry know you're…," Ginny asked, still looking at the man.

"I think he does now," Draco said, raising his chin slightly and glancing past Ginny.

Harry stepped next to his wife and looked the pale man up and down.

"It's good to see you, Draco."

Draco nodded slowly, not quite making eye contact with Harry. "Yes, it has been quite a long time. When we heard about Mr. Weasley's passing, I thought it would be… appropriate… for us to offer our condolences."

James recognized the pale man now, even though he'd never seen him in person. He compared this

grown man to the few pictures he'd seen of the young Draco Malfoy. The eyes were the same, and so was the white-blonde hair combed back from the temples. There was still the trace of a sneer there too, just like in the old school photos, but as James looked, he thought the sneer was no longer particularly mean, or even conscious. Draco had simply been doing it for so long that it was now just part of the topography of his face.

Harry studied Draco for a long moment, and then smiled. James recognized it as his dad's polite smile.

"Thank you, Draco. Ginny and I appreciate it. We really do. This must be your wife?"

Draco put an arm around the thin woman's waist. "Of course, I apologize. This is Astoria."

Harry bowed and Ginny shook the woman's hand lightly.

Ginny brightened and said, "Would you like to come up to the house for some refreshments?"

Astoria half turned to Draco, raising her eyebrows.

"I'll have some of whatever *he's* having," Draco said, glancing toward James and smiling a small, crooked smile. "Thank you, darling."

Ginny led the way between the tables and Astoria followed, glancing back once toward Harry and Draco.

"So how are things at Gringotts, Draco?" Harry asked, making no effort to lead the pale man into the throng gathered near the house. "I understand humans are almost unheard of in the bank offices, and yet here you are, vice chairman of something or other, or so I've heard. We'd have had a good laugh back in our school days if someone had told us you'd end up a big wheel at the wizarding bank of England."

"Back in our school days," Draco said quietly, still not looking directly at Harry, "we'd have had a good laugh if someone had told us we'd someday stand in the same yard without pointing wands at each other."

Harry's smile faded. "Yes," he admitted in a lower voice. "There is that."

There was a long pause. James could hear the babble of subdued voices closer to the house and the twittering of birds in the orchard. He glanced over toward Rose, who was also watching the scene with rapt interest. She raised her eyebrows and shook her head minutely.

"You know," Draco said in a different tone of voice, laughing a little humorlessly, "to tell you the truth, there isn't a single thing about the way life looks today that I would have predicted during our last years at Hogwarts."

Harry's smile had gone entirely. He stood and watched the pale man, his eyes unreadable.

"We are all taught things, growing up," Draco went on. "And rarely do we have the sheer audacity to question them. We grow to take the shape of whatever our families define for us. The weight of generations of belief presses down, and makes us in their image. And most of the time that is a good thing." Draco finally looked Harry in the eye, and for the first time since his arrival, the sneer was gone from his face. "Most of the time, it really is a good thing, Harry. But sometimes we grow up, time passes, and long, long after any hope of rejecting those defining beliefs, we look back. And we wonder."

James looked from Draco to his dad. His dad's face was still unreadable. After a long moment, Harry glanced back toward the house and sighed.

"Look, Draco, whatever you have to say, whatever you think needs to happen here…"

Draco shook his head. "Nothing needs to happen here. I didn't come here to ask your forgiveness, Harry. I just came to tell you and your family that I am sorry for your loss. Despite what you might expect, I know Arthur Weasley was a strong man. He was an honorable man. My father wouldn't tend to agree with me, but it's like I said. We get older. Some of us look back, and wonder."

Harry nodded slightly. "Thank you, Draco."

Draco took a step closer to Harry. "There was one other reason I came today though. I think I should admit that to you. I came to prove something to myself."

Harry didn't blink. "What were you hoping to prove?"

Draco smiled a little, not taking his eyes from Harry's. "I wanted to prove to myself that I could come and speak to you. And more importantly, that you'd hear me."

Draco extended his right hand. Without looking down, Harry slowly shook it. James could hardly believe what he was seeing, knowing the history of these two men. It was hardly a tearful reconciliation, and James had the distinct impression that if Draco knew anyone in his family could see it, he'd never have done it. But it was amazing, nonetheless. The handshake was over in seconds, and less than five minutes later, both Draco and Astoria had left, driving away in their very large, very black automobile. But the image of that handshake, somehow both daring and vulnerable, tenuous as a soap bubble, stuck in James' mind for a long time.

Most of the immediate family stayed over that night at the Burrow, and James felt a particular sadness in knowing it might be the last time the family gathered in the old home. A palpable sense of loss and coldness filled the rooms despite the bustle of evening activity. It was almost as if everyone was mentally throwing dustcovers over the furniture, taking down the pictures, and dividing up the dishes. James felt a vague, aimless anger about it. It was bad enough that Granddad had died. Now it seemed that the Burrow was dying too. Nothing felt normal or comfortable. Even the bedroom he'd shared with Albus and Lily for so many years seemed cold and empty. It had never once crossed his mind that this room might someday belong to someone else, someone he didn't know. Worse, what if the new owners simply tore down the house and built a new one? What if they were Muggles, who wouldn't know how to maintain such a place? He couldn't bear the thought. Angrily, he slammed the door and began to put on his pyjamas.

"Hrmm!" Lily muttered, rolling over in her bed and covering her head with a pillow.

"Never mind us," Albus griped from the big bed in the corner. "We're just trying to sleep. Let us know if we're bothering you."

"Sorry," James muttered, plopping onto the bed and kicking off his shoes.

Albus sat up and stared at the door of the room. James glanced aside to where Albus was looking. They'd seen it a thousand times before: the inside of the door was covered with worn etchings and carved words. This room had belonged to many people throughout the years, and most of them had made some sort of mark on that door, to Grandma Weasley's constant annoyance. Still, she'd made no effort to fix the door, which wouldn't have been all that difficult for a witch. James thought he knew why. In the very center of the door, much older than the rest of the carvings, was a series of carven hash-marks, the kind used to mark off days. Above the hash-marks were the words 'Days To Freedom!' Below the last set of hash-marks, which was very large, the same hand had scrawled 'Fred And George To HOGWARTS And BEYOND! Long Live Fred And George!'

"You think Grandma will really sell the place?" James asked, still gazing at the carvings on the door.

Albus didn't answer. After a moment, he rolled over, facing the wall and pulling most of the covers with him.

James stripped off his shirt and grabbed his pyjama top. He slid to the floor and padded toward the bathroom door to brush his teeth.

The bathroom was shared by three bedrooms and the third-floor hallway. Lucy, Percy's daughter, was sitting on the edge of the ancient claw-foot tub, studiously brushing her glossy black hair.

"Hi, James," she said, glancing up briefly.

"Hi, Lucy."

"It's good to see you. I missed everybody this summer," Lucy said, drawing the brush over a lock of

her hair. "Daddy says we'll be able to spend more time at home next year. I was pretty happy about that until today. I mean, by next year…"

James nodded. "Yeah."

"Did you like your first year of school?" Lucy asked, looking up. "Are you looking forward to going back?"

James nodded and picked up the glass that stood on the side of the sink. It was packed with the family's toothbrushes. He grimaced and turned the glass, trying to find his own.

"I can't wait to start school," Lucy said, returning to her brushing. "Daddy says I should enjoy being free while I can, but it doesn't feel free living with him and Mummy in hotel rooms for weeks at a time. Mummy says it's best for us to travel with him on all his international trips, so we can all stay together as a family. She likes all the travelling though. She's always dragging Molly and me out to some historical thing or other, telling us to smile while she takes pictures of us in front of this statue or that rock that some famous person from some great battle stood on or something. I write lots of letters, but not that many people write back, or at least not as often as I'd like."

She glanced meaningfully at James. He saw her in the mirror as he brushed his teeth.

"What's wrong with Albus?" Lucy asked, standing and putting away her brush.

James rinsed his toothbrush. "What do you mean?"

"He was awfully quiet tonight. It's not like him."

"Well, I guess everybody is a little quieter than usual," James replied. He glanced aside at Lucy and smiled crookedly. "Well, almost everybody."

She bumped him playfully as she passed him. At the door, she stopped and looked over her shoulder.

"We'll probably be gone when you get up in the morning," she said simply. "We have to get back to Denmark first thing, Daddy says."

"Oh," James said. "Well, happy travels, Lucy. Sorry about all that. Uncle Percy's quite the man at the Ministry, according to Dad. Things won't always be like this, don't you think?"

Lucy smiled. "It won't much matter by next year, will it? I'll be with you, Albus, Louis, Rose, and Hugo at Hogwarts. Won't that be fun?"

James nodded. There was something rather disquieting about talking to Cousin Lucy. It wasn't that he didn't love her. In many ways, he liked her better than many of his other cousins, particularly Louis. She was just so different. It made sense that she would be different, since she'd been adopted by Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey back when they believed they couldn't have kids of their own. Talking

to Lucy, much like talking to Luna Lovegood, was a rather literal affair. She was extremely, almost eerily, intelligent, but unlike most people, Lucy didn't much joke or tease. She always said exactly what she was thinking.

"Write me a letter or two this year, won't you James?" she said, her black eyes serious. "Tell me how school is going. Make me laugh. You're good at that."

James nodded again. "OK, Lucy. I will. I promise."

Gently, Lucy closed the door to the bedroom she shared with her sister. James turned toward the door to his own bedroom when a movement caught his eye. He stopped and glanced aside, following the motion. It had been in the hall adjacent. The door was slightly open, but the hallway beyond was dark. Someone was probably waiting outside for him to finish. He pushed the door open and leaned out.

"I'm done," he announced. "Bathroom's all yours."

The hallway was empty. James looked in both directions. The stairs at the end of the hall were notoriously creaky; he'd surely have heard someone on them. He frowned, and was about to turn away when the movement came again. It flickered in the moonbeams cast by the landing's large window. A shadow danced for a moment and then went still.

James stepped out of the bathroom, keeping his eyes on the pale window shape cast across the floor and wall. He could no longer see whatever had moved. He took a few steps toward the landing and his foot creaked on a floorboard. At the sound, a shadow leapt in the moon-glow. It scampered over the shape of the window like some kind of lizard, but with much longer, many-jointed arms and legs. There was a suggestion of a large head and pointy ears, and then, suddenly, the shape was gone.

James stopped in the hall, the hairs on his arms prickling. The shadow had made a noise as it moved, like dead leaves blowing on a stone. As James strained his ears, he could still hear it. A faint scuttling came from the stairs below the landing. Without thinking, he followed.

As always, the stairs were unbearably creaky. James had completely lost the sound by the time he reached the main floor. The Weasley family clock ticked to itself in the darkness of the parlor as he crept through, heading for the kitchen. One candle guttered in a volcano of wax on the windowsill. Moonlight played across the room, reflected from the dozens of pots and pans that hung over the counter. James stopped and cocked his head, listening.

The scuttling came again, and he saw it. The tiny shadow flickered and jumped over the fronts of the cabinets, flashing in and out of the moonlight. It seemed to scamper up the pantry. James glanced around quickly, trying to locate the figure that was casting the shadow, but he couldn't find it.

The shadow stopped in a corner of the ceiling and seemed to look down at James for a moment. The tiny shape looked a little bit like a house-elf except for the proportions and the unusual number of joints in the arms and legs. Then it leapt again, out of the shadow. James lunged in the creature's direction, sensing the thing was heading for the back door. To his surprise, the back door was wide

open.

James jumped out into the cooling night air. He looked around wildly, straining his ears for the tiny, scuttling sound. There was no sign of the tiny shape.

"Good evening, James," a voice from behind him said, and he nearly barked in surprise. He spun around and saw his dad seated on the woodpile, a small glass in his hand. Harry laughed.

"Sorry, son. I didn't mean to startle you. What are you so wound up about?"

James looked around again, his brow furrowed. "I thought… I thought I saw something."

Harry glanced around as well. "Well, there's a lot of somethings to be seen in this house, you know. There's the ghoul in the attic, and the garden gnomes. They usually stay out of the house, but there are always a few brave ones that'll sneak in at night and nick a turnip or two. They think harvesting the vegetables is stealing from them, so they get a little mercenary about it sometimes."

James padded over to the woodpile and climbed up next to his dad.

"What are you drinking?" he asked, peering at his father's glass.

Harry laughed again, quietly. "It's more a question of what I'm not drinking. It's Firewhisky. Never got much of a taste for the stuff, but tradition's tradition."

"What's the tradition?"

Harry sighed. "It's just a way to remember. A sip to commemorate your grandfather and all he meant to us. I did this with Grandfather and George on the night we buried your Uncle Fred."

James was silent for a while. He looked out over the yard and the dark orchard. Just below the crest of the hill, the peak of the garage could be seen in the moonlight. Crickets chirred their constant summer song.

"I'm glad to have you out here with me, James," Harry said.

James glanced up at him. "Why didn't you come and get me, then?"

Harry's shoulders lifted once. "I didn't know I wanted you here until you appeared."

James leaned back against the smooth stone of the house's foundation. It was pleasantly cool after the warmth of the day. The sky was unusually clear. The misty band of the Milky Way stretched like an arm across the sky, reaching down toward the glow of the village beyond the orchard.

"Your granddad was like a father to me, you know," Harry said. "I was just sitting here thinking about that. I used to call him that all the time, of course, but I never really thought about it. I never realized how true it was. I guess I didn't need to, until now."

James looked up at the moon. "Well, it would make sense. I mean, your own dad died when you were just a baby. You never even knew him."

Harry nodded. "And my Uncle Vernon… well, I wish I could say he did his best to be a father to me, but you've heard enough about how things were with them to know that's not true. Honestly, I never even knew what I was missing. I just knew that things weren't the way they were supposed to be."

"Until you married Mum and became an honorary Weasley?"

Harry smiled down at James and nodded. "I suppose."

"You suppose?"

The smile faded slowly from his dad's face. He looked away again, out over the darkness of the yard.

"There was Sirius," Harry said. "He was the first father I ever knew. Technically, he was my godfather, but I didn't care. He asked me to come and live with him, to be family. But it didn't work out. He ended up on the run from the Ministry, moving from place to place, always in hiding. Still, he did his best. Bought me my Firebolt, which is still my favorite broom of all time."

Harry stopped. He reached up and took off his glasses. James remained silent.

"So I was just sitting here thinking about how Granddad is really the third father I've lost, that I'm back to where I started. If you want to know the truth, son, I was sitting here feeling sorry for myself. Sirius was killed before we had the chance to take even a single family picture to remember him by. Sometimes, I can barely remember what he looked like, except for in his wanted poster. But the hole he left in my heart has never been filled. I tried to fill it with my old Headmaster Dumbledore for a while, but then he was killed, too. Granddad made me forget for a long, long time, but now, even he's gone. I mean, honestly, this should be a bit easier for me. I've had… I've had practice. And yet, if you want to know the truth, I think your mum is handling it even better than me. I'm angry, James. I want the people back that I've lost. I can't seem to just move on like the rest. Just now, I was sitting here thinking that Granddad was just one too many. I didn't want to accept it anymore. But what could I do? There's no way to bring them back, and wishing for it just makes us bitter. I was thinking all those things, and then do you know what happened?"

James looked up at his dad again, his brow furrowed. "What?"

Harry smiled slowly. "You jumped out that door like a jack-in-the-box and scared me so that I nearly dropped my glass."

James smiled back, and then laughed. "So when you startled me, you were just getting back at me, eh?"

"Perhaps," Harry admitted, still smiling. "But I realized something in that moment, and that was why I was glad you came out here, that you sat down with me. I remembered that I have another chance at

the father and child relationship, but from the other side. I have you, and Albus, and Lily. I can try my best to give you three what I missed for so much of my life. And you know what's really magical? When I do, I get a little of it back, like a reflection, from all three of you."

James looked hard at his dad, frowning a little. He thought he understood, but only very dimly. Finally, he looked down at the glass in his dad's hand.

"So are you going to drink that?"

Harry lowered his eyes to the glass of Firewhisky, and then raised it. "You know, son," he said, examining the moon through the amber liquid, "I think it's time to start some new traditions. Don't you think?" He held the glass a little higher, at arm's length.

"This is for you, Arthur," he said firmly. "For the father you were to all of us, not the least of which to me. And for you, Dumbledore, for doing your formidable best right to the end… and for my real dad, James the First, who I never knew but have always loved…"

James stared at the glass in his dad's hand as Harry paused. Finally, in a softer voice, he finished:

"And for you, Sirius Black, wherever you are. I miss you. I miss you all."

Almost casually, Harry flung the Firewhisky from the glass. It made an arc in the moonlight, sparkling and spreading, and vanished into the dimness of the yard. Harry drew a deep breath and sighed, shuddering a little as he let it out. He leaned back and put his arm around his son. They sat that way for some time, watching the moon and listening to the crickets in the orchard. Eventually, James drifted to sleep. His dad carried him to bed.

2. The Borley

"You'll be fine, James," Ginny said as she backed the car carefully into a slot next to the footpath. "It doesn't hurt, you know. Your dad's been wearing them since he was six. You're lucky you went this long without needing them."

James fumed in the front seat. Behind him, Lily whined for the tenth time, "I want to wear glasses too!"

Ginny blew the hair out of her face and jammed the shifter into 'Park'. "Lily, if you're fortunate, you'll never have to wear anything other than sunglasses, but those you can wear all you want, love."

"I don't want to wear sunglasses," Lily pouted. "I want real glasses, like James. Why does he get real glasses?"

"My eyes aren't that bad," James insisted, not moving to get out of the car. "I can read my school books just fine. I don't see why—"

"They aren't that bad yet," Ginny said firmly. "These are corrective lenses. Hopefully, they'll keep your eyesight from getting any worse. Why are you being so difficult about this?"

James scowled. "I just don't want to wear them. I'll look like a sodding idiot."

"Don't say that word," Ginny said automatically. "Besides, they don't make your father look like an idiot. Now come on. Lily, you stay here with Kreacher and have a little snack, OK? I'll be able to see you from the window and I'll be back out in just a minute. You'll keep an eye out, won't you, Kreacher?"

In the backseat, Kreacher squirmed in his bright blue child seat. "It'd be an easier task if Kreacher wasn't imprisoned in this Muggle torture device, Mistress, but as you wish."

"We've been through this, Kreacher. Regardless of what Muggles think they see when they look at you, children are required to ride in a safety seat. It's bad enough that you insist on wearing nothing but a tea towel. People aren't accustomed to seeing a five-year-old in a nappy."

"It's the best disguise poor Kreacher can manage, Mistress," he croaked morosely. "Kreacher has never been accustomed to the society of Muggles, but Kreacher does his best with what small magic he has at his disposal."

Ginny rolled her eyes as she climbed out of the car. "Just tap the horn if you need anything, all right? Your 'small magic' can manage that, I'm fairly certain."

Ginny led James toward the office.

"Why do we have to go to a Muggle eye doctor anyway?" James complained quietly. "Aren't there magical eye doctors with, like, invisible glasses? Or spells that magically fix your eyes?"

Ginny smiled. "Not everything has a magical solution, James. A Muggle eye doctor is as good as a magical one, and this one's more convenient than Diagon Alley. You've already been here for your exam. I don't see what you're so afraid of."

"I'm not afraid," James said disgustedly as they entered the lobby of the office. He looked around at the tiny waiting area. It was exactly the same as the last time he'd been there, right down to the number of fish in the grimy aquarium and the magazines on the end table.

"James Potter," Ginny told the fat woman behind the glass partition. "We have a two o'clock appointment with Doctor Prendergast."

James plopped into the same chair he'd sat in the last time he'd been there. He kicked his heel on the thin carpet, grumbling to himself.

A few minutes later, Dr. Prendergast emerged, smiling, skinny, and red-cheeked. He tucked his own glasses into a pocket of his white coat.

"Do come back, James," he said jovially. "Your mother can come too if she likes."

Ginny glanced at James. "Do you want me to? I can go get Lily and bring her back with us."

He sighed and stood up. "No. Go ahead and check on her. Kreacher's probably trying to feed her caviare for a snack again."

Ginny grinned at Dr. Prendergast and then threw a quick warning look at James. "The glasses are already paid for, James. Just come out to the car once you're done with the doctor, all right?"

"Is Kreacher some sort of family pet?" Dr. Prendergast asked James as he led him into the examination room.

"He's my half-brother," James replied. "He lives in the basement. We feed him a bucket of fish heads twice a week."

Dr. Prendergast blinked at James, his smile growing somewhat brittle. "That's very, ahem, amusing,

James. What an interesting imagination."

James sat on the edge of the examination chair as the doctor put on his own glasses and rummaged in a cabinet. He produced a box and opened it on the table.

"Here we are," he said happily, extracting a pair of black eyeglasses. To James, they looked three times wider than his head. He slumped.

"Let me just help you get them on and we'll test the prescription. Won't take a minute."

He held them out to James, and then slipped them onto his head. James closed his eyes as the glasses settled onto his ears. When he opened them again, the world looked very slightly smaller and warped a bit around the edges. He glanced around, trying to get used to the feeling.

"There!" the doctor said brightly. "And how does that feel?"

James sighed again. "All right, I guess. It's a little weird."

"That's perfectly natural. You'll get used to them in no time at all."

James had already determined that he would not let that happen. He intended to wear the dreaded glasses for his mum to see for the next two days, and then to stick them in his trunk the moment he got on the Hogwarts Express. He didn't really need them anyway. He was sure of it.

Dr. Prendergast sat James on a stool in the corner of the examination room and turned him toward the eye chart on the opposite wall. James covered one eye at a time and read down the chart in a dejected monotone. The doctor nodded happily, removed his own glasses again and opened the blinds of the small room, letting in the afternoon sunlight.

"That's very good, James," he said, opening the examination room door. "We're mostly done. Just let me schedule your follow-up appointment and you can be off."

When James was alone in the room, he stood up and approached the mirror next to the window. The glasses weren't really that bad, he thought, but they were bad enough. They felt heavy and clunky on his face. He scowled and took them off.

In the mirror, something moved behind his reflection. James glanced up, and then turned around. The sunlight poured into the room, brightening it considerably. James saw his own shadow on the wall, projected onto a large poster showing a diagram of an eyeball. Another shadow scampered past his. James recognized it immediately as the same shape he'd seen a few nights earlier in the hallway at the Burrow. Without thinking, he reached for his wand in his back pocket, but of course it wasn't there. He wasn't yet allowed to do any magic out of school, and his mum forbade him from carrying it when they were out in the Muggle world.

The shadowy shape shimmied up the wall and leapt. James widened his eyes, surprised and

bewildered, as the shadow seemed to come off the wall, leaping out of the beam of sunlight. It made a slightly darker shape in the room, almost invisible. The shadow wasn't being cast by the creature; somehow, the creature was its shadow. It landed on the small table next to the examination chair. To James' shock, it began to pick up some of Doctor Prendergast's tools and fling them around the room. They clattered and bounced off the walls. James jammed his glasses into the pocket of his jeans and jumped to catch some of the flying tools.

"Stop!" he whispered harshly at the tiny shadow imp. "What are you doing? You're going to get me into trouble!"

James ducked beneath the examination chair, scooping up the scattered tools. Meanwhile, having cleared off the table, the shadow imp jumped to the stool and scampered up the wall. It reached the cabinet and darted behind a row of thick books. One by one, the books began to pop off the shelf. James dumped the tools onto the table with one hand and lunged to catch the first few books with the other. Unable to catch them all, James bent to scoop them off the floor. A particularly large volume struck him in the back of the head, making him drop the books he'd already collected. Angrily, he spun on his heels, looking for the creature, meaning to grab it if he could. It jumped from the bookshelf to the wall, snagging a corner of the poster. The poster popped free and fell like a sail, covering James' head. He struggled out from under it and lunged at the creature. It leapt to the ceiling fan and sat perched on one of the slowly revolving blades. It seemed to be taunting James.

"This is a Muggle place!" James hissed at the creature. "But I'm a wizard! You can thank your lucky stars I don't have my wand with me!"

The creature recoiled at that, as if it had understood. It spun and jumped toward the window. James, still partly caught under the fallen poster, threw himself over the examination chair, reaching for the creature. He landed hard on the chair, which moved. It rolled on its casters, scooting across the floor and striking the wall below the window just as the door opened.

James looked up into the face of Dr. Prendergast, whose eyes widened.

"Look," James said quickly, clambering off the examination chair, "I don't know what it was, but it wasn't me! I didn't do any magic, I didn't knock all your books down, or tear your poster off the wall, or make any of this mess. All of this was done by some weird little shadow monster. You probably don't believe in shadow monsters, and that's fine, because I myself didn't even know they existed until now, so that's all right, but we'll probably all end up Obliviated anyway, so who really cares, right?"

Dr. Prendergast's gaze remained locked on James. His eyes looked rather magnified behind his glasses. James took a moment to glance around at the mess that had been made of the examination room. To his great surprise, there wasn't any mess. The books sat neatly on their shelves. The poster hung on the wall, perfectly intact. The eye examination tools lay neatly on a cloth on the table in the corner.

"Ah, ah hah, hah!" Dr. Prendergast laughed, smiling a little nervously. "This is like the story about

your brother eating fish heads out of a bucket, I see. Like I said before, Mr. Potter, what a very, er, interesting imagination. Here is your reminder for your next appointment. I believe your mother is, ahem, waiting for you outside."

On the morning of the first of September, James was feeling unusually surly. The weather seemed to match his mood, having turned cool and foggy, covering the city like a wet blanket. James stared through his reflection in the car window as the family wove through the city toward King's Cross station. He'd made an attempt to tell his mum about the weird shadow creature he'd seen twice now, but she had been irritable and harried and had told him to save the inexplicable imaginary creatures for Luna Lovegood, who rather specialized in them. James had determined to ask Luna about it the next time he saw her, but for now, preparing for his return to Hogwarts and managing his strangely churlish brother, Albus, were enough to keep him busy. Soon enough, he'd put the shadow imp out of his mind.

Things had begun badly that morning. James, excited about going back to school, had his trunk packed and ready, waiting beside the front door of the Potter family home. When he tromped back upstairs to collect his owl, Nobby, Albus was still sitting on the bed in his room, tying his shoes. His trunk sat open next to the desk, half-packed.

"Come on, Al," James said, setting Nobby's cage on the desk. "Dad's already pulling the car around front. If we don't get packed and on the road we'll be late."

Albus made no effort to hurry. He slumped off his bed and stalked out of the room. James watched him go, rolled his eyes, and began piling Albus' school books into the trunk. Albus' new snowy owl, who was as yet unnamed, sat in her cage next to Nobby's, clicking her beak nervously.

"At least you don't have anything to pack," he griped to the owls. "Or a troublesome little brother."

"Albus," Ginny's voice called from downstairs, "James, it's time to go."

James grabbed Albus' new robes and a handful of clothes from the closet, stuffed them into the trunk, and slammed the lid. If Albus got to Hogwarts without a clean pair of underpants, it was his own fault. James grabbed the handle and lugged the trunk toward the door, meeting Albus as he came back.

"Is that my trunk?" Albus demanded.

James pulled the trunk past him, into the hallway. "Just get the owls, will you? We're going to be late."

"I wasn't done packing!"

"Well, I guess you're done now, aren't you?" James said, feeling suddenly angry. "Dad and Mum are waiting. What, did you decide you don't want to go to school after all?"

Without answering, Albus collected the owls' cages rather noisily and followed James down to the car.

As the family arrived at King's Cross station, James tried to lighten the mood.

"Just think, Al, by tonight, you'll be all settled in, sitting in front of the giant snake's head fireplace and drinking a flagon of Butterbeer with your new snakey mates."

Albus scowled and opened the car door, stepping out into the fog of the parking structure. James followed.

"Can I push a trolley at least?" Lily asked, displaying her best pout.

"I'm sorry, Lily," Harry said, piling the trunks and owl cages onto two trolleys. "They're rather heavy, and we're in a hurry. You'll be seeing Hugo in a few minutes, though. If all goes well, Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron will be joining us for lunch as soon as the train leaves. Won't that be nice?"

"I don't want lunch," Lily said petulantly.

The family entered the large doors of the station and threaded through the commuters, attracting some curious stares as the owls hooted and fluttered their wings. Lily followed her parents, whining idly about her desire to go to Hogwarts with her brothers this year instead of two years from now.

"I've been in the Slytherin common room," James said to Albus as they approached the platform. "Ralph showed me. Zane's even been in the girls' sleeping quarters. It's kind of like a five star hotel in Middle Ages Transylvania, if you know what I mean. You'll love it."

Albus turned to look at James. "I won't! I won't be in Slytherin!"

"Give it a rest, James," Ginny admonished.

"I only said he might be," James said defensively, grinning at Albus. "There's nothing wrong with that. He might be in Slyth—"

He saw his mum's warning expression and fell silent. Feeling a little peeved, he took the trolley from her, glanced over his shoulder at Albus, and then pushed forward, running toward the partition. Just as it had last year, the partition seemed to dissolve. He flashed through it and pulled the trolley to a stop on platform nine and three-quarters. It was as crowded as it had been the last time he'd been there, although the mingled fog and steam made it hard to see everyone. Out of the dense mist, James could hear the chug and hiss of the Hogwarts Express, and for the first time all morning, he felt a bit

better. Without waiting for the rest of the family, he pushed his trolley through the crowd toward the sound of the train.

"James!" a voice called out. James glanced around and saw his Cousin Lucy standing next to Uncle Percy, who was apparently lost in animated conversation with a man in a pinstriped cloak. Percy's wife, Audrey, stood nearby, holding Lucy's sister's hand and looking over a schedule of departures.

"Hi, Lucy," James said, pushing the trolley over to her. "I didn't expect to see you here. What's going on?"

"We're on our way back already," she shrugged. "Daddy got a call. There was some sort of magical disturbance in Wandsworth and the Ministry needs him back. At least we get to go home for awhile. Where's Albus?"

James gestured back the way he'd come. "Albus is still in a snit. He's been grumpy ever since the Burrow."

Lucy nodded understandingly but said nothing.

"Well, I better get my trunk on board," James said. "We're already late. See you, Lucy."

"Bye, James," Lucy replied, then added. "Keep an eye on Albus, all right?"

James felt a tiny twinge of guilt at that. He nodded. "Sure, Lucy. I'm his big brother."

Lucy smiled and waved. James turned and ran toward the train, pushing his trolley. As he met the porter, he saw Teddy Lupin moving through the fog with Victoire at his side, lost in hushed conversation. Satisfied that his things would be loaded safely onto the train, James trotted to catch up to them.

"Hey, Ted, Victoire," he called.

They stopped near the station, but Victoire continued talking, her head close to Ted's.

"It's time," she said, her face serious. "I do not wish to spend the year away at school with this secret between us."

"It isn't between us, Vic," Ted said reasonably. "You know your parents aren't ready to know about us. Your mum already thinks I'm a bum waiting to happen. Give me some time to arrange things in Hogsmeade. Once I've proven I'm serious…"

"To whom do you need to prove yourself?" Victoire asked, stepping back and placing her fists on her hips. "My parents, or yourself?"

Ted rolled his eyes. He glanced at James. "This is what it's like dating a girl whose family I've known all my life," he said. "They know me too well for my charms to work on them."

"Your charms work just fine," Victoire sniffed. "In fact, if it wasn't for your charms, you wouldn't even have this problem."

"Sorry to interrupt," James said, raising his hands, palms out. "I just wanted to say hello. I'll just fade away into the mist again."

"Wait a minute," Ted said, his face growing thoughtful. "I've got an idea."

Suddenly, he grabbed Victoire and hugged her to him. She resisted for a moment, but then he kissed her, and she relaxed. Slowly, she dropped the handbag she was carrying and wrapped her arms around Ted's neck. James took a step backwards and looked around nervously.

"Er, like I said—" he began but stopped as Ted held up a finger, still kissing Victoire. Finally, he broke away and looked aside at James, smiling crookedly.

"You saw that, right?" he asked.

"I don't think I saw anything but that," James replied uncomfortably.

"Good. Now do me a favor."

Victoire looked at Ted, her arms still around his neck. "Teddy, no…"

Ted's smile didn't waver. "Go tell everybody what you saw."

"What?" James blinked.

"Just tell them. Say I came to see Victoire off, and you saw us snogging right here on the platform. Say you interrupted us and I told you to shove off. It's the juiciest bit of gossip on the platform this morning, and you get to be the one to share it. It'll get the word out about us and we won't even have to say a thing," he turned back to Victoire. "Happy?"

She tilted her head haughtily at him but smiled. "You're a rogue," she replied.

Ted shrugged. "I'm simply good at coming up with reasons to kiss you. So what do you think, James? Are you up to the task?"

James grinned. "I learned how to lie from Zane. I'll make it as juicy as possible."

"Excellent," Ted replied. "And just to make it as realistic as possible," he made his face stern and looked at James, "shove off, will you? I'm busy."

With that, he kissed Victoire again. She grinned and giggled, pushing away from him playfully. James turned on his heels and trotted back into the crowd. After a moment, he saw his family gathered with Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione near the train. They were all looking back toward the station. James followed the direction of their gaze and saw Draco Malfoy standing with his wife and son near the

partition. Draco nodded curtly in their direction, and then turned to his son. The son had the same sharp features and white-blonde hair. He glanced toward James, seeming to recognize him. After a moment, the boy looked away again, as if bored.

James remembered the news he was supposed to share. He ran toward his family, dodging and weaving through the crowd. As he approached, he heard Uncle Ron say to Rose in a pointed voice, "Don't get *too* friendly with him though, Rosie. Granddad Weasley would never forgive you if you married a pureblood." James was glad to interrupt the uncomfortable pause that followed.

"Hey!" he yelled as he approached. Rose saw him first and smiled. The rest of the family turned curiously. "Teddy's back there. Just seen him. And guess what he's doing? Snogging Victoire!"

The adults looked down at James rather blankly. James raised his eyebrows, exasperated at their lack of response. "Our Teddy! Teddy Lupin! Snogging our Victoire! Our cousin! And I asked him what he was doing— "

"You interrupted them?" Ginny said incredulously. "You are so like Ron…"

James plowed on, committed to telling it like Ted asked. "—and he said he'd come to see her off! And then he told me to go away! He's snogging her!"

Lily spoke up, "Oh, it would be lovely if they got married."

James rolled his eyes, ignoring the rest of the conversation. Well, at least he'd succeeded in getting the word out. Ted would be satisfied. After a moment, James heard his dad saying, "Why don't we just invite him to come live with us and have done with it?"

"Yeah!" James agreed instantly. "I don't mind sharing with Al. Teddy could have my room!"

"No," Harry interjected. "You and Al will share a room only when I want the house demolished." He checked his watch, and smiled. "It's nearly eleven. You'd better get on board."

James hugged his mum and dad and a minute later climbed aboard the train, leaving the noise and steam behind him. He clumped into the nearest compartment with Rose right behind him. She pushed the window open and leaned out to wave. James joined her and glanced out. Albus was still on the platform with their dad squatted next to him. James remembered Harry doing the same thing with him last year, and didn't doubt that Albus and he were having a very similar conversation. Ginny saw James and waved at him. Lily skulked nearby, loosely holding her mum's free hand.

Albus disengaged from his dad, hugged his mum, and then clambered onto the train. A moment later, he entered the compartment with James and Rose. There was a commotion behind them as several other students crowded into the compartment, leaning toward the open window, chattering excitedly.

"Why are they all staring?" Albus asked as he and Rose turned.

On the platform, Ron shrugged and called up, "Don't let it worry you. It's me. I'm extremely famous."

Albus smiled, and then laughed a little. Rose chuckled at her father. With a loud rattle and a jerk, the train began to move. James couldn't help noticing that his brother seemed to feel a little bit better. Albus smiled, allowing some excitement to show on his face as he waved. Alongside the train, their father walked, one hand raised and a wistful smile on his face. The train slowly gathered speed and James watched his parents get smaller and smaller on the platform. Rose leaned out the window and waved heartily at Ron and Hermione, then pulled herself in with a sigh, drawing the window shut.

"Well," she said, plopping onto the seat across from James, "we're off!"

James nodded. Albus watched out the window until the platform was out of sight, and then joined Rose on the seat. He leaned back and watched the window as London began to stream past.

"So what do you think, Al?" James asked, remembering Lucy's admonition on the platform. "Looking forward to your first year?"

Albus looked at James for a long moment, and then sighed hugely. "I'd be looking forward to it a lot more if I knew you'd packed me some socks."

James blinked, smiling a little, and kicked his brother's foot. "You never change them anyway. I didn't think you'd need any more than what's on your feet already."

"That's disgusting," Rose announced.

There was a loud knock on the compartment door and the three looked up.

Ralph leaned in, his face flushed and smiling. "Hi, everybody. Room for one more?"

"So Zane is going to Alma Aleron this year?" Rose asked, feigning disinterest.

"You knew he was ever since he visited with his parents last July," Albus said.

"Well, he wasn't completely sure then, was he? He said there was a chance his father might get his contract extended."

"No," Albus insisted. "He said even if that happened, he'd probably end up going back to the States with his sister and mum. You're just sweet on him and can't help thinking that one bat of your eyes should have been enough to get him to climb mountains and forge mighty rivers to be at Hogwarts with you this year."

Rose rolled her eyes theatrically. "That's patently ridiculous. I barely know him, and what I do know of him, I find completely insufferable."

"Insufferable enough to try to make the Draught of Enamor?" Albus grinned.

Rose whipped her head around and gaped at Albus. "I never…!"

Albus shrugged, still grinning. "You need to learn to lock your diary with more than the silly little Forget-me-knot Charm that came with it. You of all people should know how easy those are to jinx open."

"Why, you rat!" Rose cried, her voice rising so that it was nearly inaudible. "If I knew how to perform any curses, I'd turn your head into a marshmallow!"

"Is this what things are always like in your family?" Ralph asked James, munching a licorice wand.

"Pretty much," James nodded. "It's a good thing Louis hasn't found us yet. He really brings out the worst in Rose."

"This isn't her worst?"

James dug in his bag and produced his wand. Finally, now that he was on the train, he was allowed to use it again. He was tempted to strike up a game of Winkles and Augers with Ralph, but he knew that Ralph would defeat him easily with his unorthodox green-tipped wand. James would've liked to believe that Ralph's skills were only due to the fact that his wand had once been a part of Merlin's magical staff, but he knew better. Ralph was talented, and he probably didn't even know the limit of his own talents. Being beat by Ralph at Winkles and Augers was particularly galling because Ralph tended to apologize for it.

"It is a shame that Zane couldn't come back with us this year," James said. "It's going to be a bit weird without him."

"Well, it was always a bit weird with him too," Ralph said. "So maybe it'll all even out. Besides, we'll still get to see him. He says that the Alma Alerons have some experimental new communication methods. He's going to be on the testing team for them."

James nodded. "Sounds like old Chancellor Franklyn has been hard at work since he left."

"I'll say," Ralph agreed. "Dad visited them over the summer and they took him on a tour of the school and grounds. The whole campus is packed into a single yard surrounded by a stone wall in some old neighborhood of Philadelphia. You'd never even notice it if you walked past it. Talk about unplotted space! They even have a Timelock!"

James furrowed his brow. "What's a Timelock?"

"Oh, it's totally cool," Ralph enthused. "It's the only way into the school. It's kind of like an airlock. You know how when rockets connect to a space station, they have this locked off chamber between them?"

James raised his eyebrows sardonically.

"Oh yeah," Ralph said, "I keep forgetting you were raised by wizards. All right, an airlock is kind of a closed chamber between two places with really different atmospheres. It has doors on both sides. When you go into the airlock on your side, you bring your atmosphere in with you. Then the doors lock and your atmosphere is swapped out for a new one. That's the only way a spacewalker can get inside the breathable environment of a space station."

James' expression didn't change.

"All right," Ralph said defensively, "so I grew up watching science-fiction films. Not all of us were born with a silver wand in our mouths, you know."

James laughed. "Go on, Ralphinator. So what's a Timelock?"

"Well, that's just it! It's an airlock for time! Not only is the Alma Aleron campus hidden inside some magical stone wall that makes it seem loads smaller than it is, it's hidden in time, too! You have to go in through the Timelock to exchange your time for whatever time the campus is occupying on any given day."

"That's impossible," Rose chimed in, lowering the book she'd been reading. "Time travel is not only highly unstable, but extremely risky. The Ministry has even outlawed Time-Turners because too many people were fiddling around in the temporal fluxstream, making history all wonky."

"The 'temporal fluxstream'?" Ralph repeated, blinking.

"'Wonky'?" Albus grinned.

"Rose takes a little bit of getting used to," James said. "But she's the person to go to if you need a cure for poison ivy."

"Or the occasional love potion," Albus added.

"It would've worked if I'd succeeded in getting him to drink it," Rose pointed out primly. "And I was only testing it on him. I just find him slightly less obnoxious than any of you."

"What kind of wand did you get, Rosie?" James asked, changing the subject.

"Only my dad's allowed to call me that, Jameson," Rose replied, reaching for her bag.

James smiled. "'Jameson' isn't even my real name."

"It's willow," Rose said, flourishing her wand daintily and holding it up. "Eight inches, with a Pegasus feather core."

"What about yours, Albus?" Ralph asked, popping the last bit of licorice wand into his mouth.

Albus' face changed a little and he shrugged. "It's a wand. Eight and a half inches. It's made out of yew."

Ralph nodded. "So what's the core made of?"

Albus glanced aside, out the window, his face darkening. "What's your wand core made of, Ralph?" he asked pointedly.

Ralph blinked. He reached into his bag and produced his wand. James looked at it, remembering it well. It was at least a foot long, and thick as a broomstick. The end was whittled to a dull point and painted lime green. It looked as silly as always, and yet James knew, perhaps more than anyone, what that wand was capable of in Ralph's hand. It had saved James' life at least once.

"Well," Ralph admitted, "I used to think it had a yeti whisker core—"

"A yeti whisker?" Albus said, leaning forward and grinning.

"We've been through this," Rose sighed. "Nobody knows what's inside Ralph's wand except maybe Merlin. And I'm sure not going to ask him. He creeps me out."

James looked at Rose. "He does? Why?"

Rose gave James an expression of exasperated disdain. "He's *only* the most famously self-serving wizard in the history of the magical world, you know."

"Yeah, I suppose, but he's not evil."

"Hasn't it occurred to you that a wizard as powerful as Merlin could be all the scarier because he's not evil but just selfish?"

James frowned incredulously. "Where in the world did you get that? Your own parents were part of the committee that succeeded in getting him appointed Headmaster."

Rose put her wand back into her bag and shoved it under her seat. "Let's just say even his strongest supporters think there's a lot we don't know about him."

"Like what?" James demanded.

"Like things we don't know," Rose repeated pedantically. "That's pretty much the point: we don't *know* them."

James scoffed and turned away, fingering his wand.

The sky outside the train window was still grey as slate, promising rain. Fields marched past monotonously. James decided to go see if he could find any of his other friends. He stood and shoved the door open.

"Hey," Ralph said, not looking up from the tabloid he'd flipped open, "if you see the cart lady, send her back down this way, would you? I'm starved."

James nodded and stepped out. He was about to close the door again when Albus squeezed through, joining James in the corridor.

"Why didn't you tell Ralph what your wand core was?" James asked as they walked.

"What business is it of his?" Albus replied, as if daring James to respond.

James shrugged. After a moment, Albus sighed.

"Look, it's bad enough everyone makes those jokes about my name. Asp, a kind of snake, ha ha. If word gets out that my wand core is a dragon heartstring…"

"I think it's kind of cool," James said. "Nobody messes with a dragon."

"Except for Uncle Charlie and Harold and Jules," Albus said, allowing a small grin.

"Yeah, but they're totally dotty. They're almost as bad as Hagrid when it comes to dragons." James stopped in the corridor and looked at Albus. "It really isn't a big deal, you know. I tease you about it, but really, it's only because when I was being sorted, I actually considered—"

Something flickered past them in the corridor. James saw it and whipped around, gasping.

"What?" Albus asked, glancing around.

James shook his head, still studying the shadows of the corridor. "I don't know. Something. I think I've seen it before, but I don't know what it is yet."

"I see your first year of school has you just brimming with knowledge," Albus said.

James held up his hand toward Albus, silencing him. The light in the corridor was watery and indirect, full of flitting shadows as the train passed through a stand of woods, but James was certain he recognized the shape and movement of the tiny shadow imp. He was intent on finding it.

There was a sudden noise and burst of air, making James jump. He glanced up as a large man with very short dark hair stepped into the corridor from the adjoining car. He slid the connecting door shut easily, slamming it into place.

"Bitter day out there, boys," he boomed, stalking toward them down the aisle. "You'd best be getting to your compartments. It's not wise to be gallivanting about a moving train."

"We're just, er, looking for our friends," James replied.

"Same as me, then," the man grinned, sidling past. "Better luck finding them than I've had, eh?"

The large man moved to the end of the corridor and yanked the door open, letting in another burst of air and noise from the connecting breezeway between the cars. A moment later, he slammed the door.

"Was he a teacher?" Albus asked, looking after the man.

"I've never seen him before," James answered, distracted. He noticed that the door through which the man had come was not entirely closed. It had slid slightly back open when he'd slammed it. A whistle of cool air pushed through it.

The shadow imp suddenly landed in front of the door, examining the small opening. James saw it and his eyes widened. The creature seemed to turn back to him, as if daring him to follow. The crack was far too narrow even for the tiny shadow shape, but then it turned and squeezed through, pouring through the space like smoke.

James bolted toward it.

"What is it?" Albus said, following.

"Did you see it?" James asked, trying to keep his footing on the swaying floor.

"Yeah! Looked like a shadow, but standing all by itself!"

James reached the door and yanked it open. Misty air and the deafening clack of the train's wheels poured in. The tiny connecting breezeway rocked disconcertingly, but the creature was there, capering in the alcove of the doorway leading into the next car. James reached for it, but it slipped beneath the door, making itself so flat as to virtually disappear.

"Come on!" James said, yanking the next door open. "I want to see what this thing is! I owe it a thrashing!"

The next car of the train was exactly like the previous. Compartments all along the right side were full of Hogwarts students, chattering and laughing. James ignored them as he chased the creature down the corridor. It scampered in and out of the shifting light, capering up the walls and leaping over the floor. James realized he still had his wand in his hand. Quickly, he tried to remember all the spells Professor Franklyn had taught him last year in Defence Against the Dark Arts.

"There it goes!" Albus stopped, pointing. "It's heading for the engine! We can't go in there, can we?"

James was determined to follow the shadow creature. He ran forward as it shimmied into the sliver

of light between the door and the wall. James could see through the tiny window of the door. The next car wasn't a passenger car, but the coal car that fuelled the engine. The noise of the crimson locomotive was noticeably louder here. He reached for the door handle and pulled, but it was locked.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Albus said as James pointed his wand at the door.

"Alohomora!" James said loudly. There was a yellow flash and the door slid partway open. James grabbed the handle and yanked the door aside.

Cool, misty air and bits of soot blew into the compartment. The coal car was a black iron wall on the other side of a connecting knuckle. Beneath the giant knuckle, the ties of the train tracks flickered past. The shadow imp danced on the knuckle, maintaining a dizzying balance in the barreling wind and noise.

James pointed his wand. "What are you?" he called down to it. "What are you doing here?"

The creature suddenly bent down. It wrapped its many-jointed arms around the pin that secured the knuckle together. It began to pull fiercely, trying to force the pin out and disconnect the train.

"Stop it!" James commanded, trying to keep his wand steady in the push of wind and mist. "Stop it or I'll Stun you! I know how to do it!"

The creature increased its ferocity, yanking on the pin wildly. James drew his breath.

"Stupefy!" he yelled at the exact moment that a large hand grabbed his wrist, pulling it up. The spell rebounded off the iron wall of the coal car and vanished into the blowing mist outside. James spun as far as he could, his arm still held upright in a vice-like grip.

"That would not be a wise idea," Merlin said in his calm, rumbling voice. He was standing directly behind James, resplendent in his dress robes and oiled beard, his eyes locked on the shadow creature. He released James' hand but did not step back.

James shifted aside as the wizard moved forward. Albus was standing nearby, his eyes wide.

Merlin spoke to the creature. James couldn't understand the words but recognized the language Merlin had used when speaking to Headmistress McGonagall on the Sylvven Tower, the night after his arrival. It was a very dense language, full of corners and tongue-twisting piles of consonants.

The imp stopped pulling the pin of the knuckle and slowly stood up, as if transfixed. It stepped into the compartment, almost between Merlin's feet, and stopped, swaying slightly as the train rocked. Merlin slid the door shut, closing off the wind and the clack of the wheels. He stepped back, still keeping his eyes on the shadowy shape.

"Mr. Potter," he said calmly, "would you be so kind as to stand guard for a moment? I need to retrieve something from my compartment. I'm afraid I was rather unprepared when I saw you running past in

pursuit of the Borley."

"The Borley?" James said, looking down at the slowly swaying creature. "Er, yeah, sure. What do I need to do to guard it?"

"Absolutely nothing," Merlin said. "I've entranced it, but the words won't last long. Just watch it in case it awakens again."

"What should we do if it does?" Albus interjected, pushing between Merlin and James.

Merlin looked down at him. "Tell me which way it goes," he rumbled. He turned to stalk heavily down the corridor. "Oh, and boys?" he said, looking back at them over his shoulder. "Whatever you do, use no magic in the Borley's presence."

A moment later, the connecting door opened and slammed as Merlin passed through.

"What in the world is a Borley?" Albus asked, staring down at the entranced shadow shape.

"I've no idea."

"So that was Merlin, eh?"

James nodded. "He's pretty hard to miss."

Halfway down the corridor, a compartment door slid open. Both Potters looked up as a boy stepped out into the corridor. The boy glanced back in the direction Merlin had gone, and then turned to James and Albus. His face was cold, disinterested, and very pale. James recognized the son of Draco Malfoy.

"Mischief already?" the boy commented. "And already in trouble with the new Headmaster to boot."

"Well, it's no business of yours either way," James said, trying to stand in front of the tiny shadow creature.

"I know you," the boy said, smiling and narrowing his eyes. "The two Potters. I can't remember your first names. What's the point, really?"

"What do you want?" James asked, trying to put some authority into his voice. He was a secondyear, after all. It wasn't much, but it was something.

"At first, I wanted to see if you were as thick as I'd heard. The story among the Slytherins is that the older of you has delusions of being a great hero, just like your father supposedly was. But now that I see that you're both only a pair of frightened kids, I just want to see what you have cornered there," the boy said, gesturing toward the floor at James' feet.

Albus stepped forward. "Like he said, it's none of your business. Why don't you shove off, Scorpius?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't plan to," the pale boy said, still smiling indulgently. "I'm the curious type, I am. Let's have a look, why don't we?"

"I saw your dad last week," James said. He realized he still had his wand in his hand.

"Yes," Scorpius said, rolling his eyes. "At the old man's funeral. He thought it was the noble thing to do, I suppose. Mother didn't agree, but she goes along with Father's ideas like a good wife should. Personally, I didn't see the point. It's hard to feel bad about one dead Weasley when there are so many more to take his place."

James felt something rush past him and glanced down, certain that the shadow creature had reawakened. He was only aware of what was happening when he heard the thump that followed. Albus had rushed Scorpius, throwing him against the wall of the compartment hard enough to make the boy stagger. They collapsed to the floor in an untidy jumble.

"How dare you? Get your hands off me!" Scorpius cried, struggling as Albus wrestled to keep him down.

"Take that back!" Albus yelled furiously. "Take it back right now!"

More doors opened along the corridor. Curious students gathered, some grinning and pointing.

"James," Sabrina Hildegard, a fellow Gryffindor, said as she stepped into the corridor. "What's going on? First, the connecting door is left open, and then—"

There was a sudden crack and a flash of red. Scorpius clambered to his feet, his face livid. He pointed his wand wildly, but Albus lunged at him.

"No!" James shouted. "Albus, stop!"

There was a furor of voices and clamoring figures as Scorpius stumbled backwards, trying to evade Albus' reaching arms. Another spell ricocheted off the ceiling of the compartment. Suddenly, James remembered the Borley. He spun around, looking for it, but the creature was gone. Desperately, he scanned the corridor.

"No spells!" he shouted, holding up his hands, but no one noticed him. James was jostled as more students pressed into the narrow space, crowding to see the fight. He spun around, looking for the creature, and suddenly saw it. The Borley leapt within the shadows of the milling students. It was much larger than it had been at first, and seemed rather more solid. It jumped to the floor and James heard a thump as it landed. Unthinkingly, he pointed his wand at it. The Borley saw him and lunged as if to attack. James pulled his wand up and ducked. The creature went over his head and disappeared into the throng that filled the corridor.

"BE STILL!" a very large voice boomed, and James didn't have to guess who it belonged to. He grimaced and slumped against the wall.

The crowd of onlookers silenced immediately. A moment later, the corridor had emptied again as the milling students slipped sheepishly back into their compartments, leaving James, Albus, and Scorpius. Albus had a handful of Scorpius' robes. Scorpius still had his wand in his hand. He tried to slip it surreptitiously into his robes.

Merlin rolled his eyes slowly. "So," he said in his low, rumbling voice, "can any of you tell me in which direction it went?"

3. The Sorting

"You can't take ten points from Gryffindor before we even get to school!" James insisted, trotting to keep up with Merlin's massive stride. Albus followed, glancing back angrily.

"Deducting points from the offender's house is the preferred method of discipline at Hogwarts, Mr. Potter," Merlin said distractedly. "I asked you to guard the Borley. And not to allow any magic to be used in its presence. Failing that, you were to at least point me in the direction of its escape. I'd not be fulfilling my duties as Headmaster if I didn't mete out some form of discipline for your complete disregard of my direction."

"But Scorpius did the magic!" James insisted, jumping in front of the Headmaster and forcing him to stop. "It's not my fault he's a hotheaded git! I did everything I could to stop him!"

Merlin was scanning the corridor slowly. "Did you truly do everything you could, Mr. Potter?"

James threw up his hands. "Well, I suppose I could have sat on Albus to prevent him from attacking the bloody loudmouth!"

Merlin nodded, and then looked down at James, giving him his full attention for the first time. "It is true, what they say, Mr. Potter: I come from a much different age. When I give instruction, I do not do so lightly. It will behoove you to remember that a lack of effort in carrying out those instructions goes much poorer with me than an excess of effort. Do you understand?"

James worked through the sentence in his head, nodding slightly. He glanced up at the Headmaster and shook his head.

"It means," Merlin replied slowly, "that I expect you to do everything within your power to carry out my requests. If sitting on your brother might have helped, then next time, I expect you to do exactly that. The Borley has escaped, and more importantly, your negligence has allowed it to gain power. It will not be as easy to transfix next time. And you should be aware that, up until a few minutes ago, it was relatively harmless."

Merlin's lowered brow and glittering eyes made the point very clearly. James still felt unjustly accused, but he nodded his understanding.

"What is it?" Albus asked. "This Borley thing."

Merlin turned away, half dismissing the boys. "They are a form of Shade: shadow creatures. They are purely magical beings, and as such, they feed on magic. They'll taunt young or foolish wizards into using magic on them so that they might feed and grow. When they are tiny, they are harmless. As they grow…"

James looked around the compartment, following Merlin. "What do they grow into?"

"I believe," Merlin said gravely, "that you call them 'Dementors'."

Both James and Albus knew about Dementors. James shuddered.

"I think I saw this same Borley a week ago, back at my grandparents' house," James commented. "And then later, at the eye doctor's. It made a horrible mess, but a few minutes later, when the doctor came into the room, the mess had vanished. Everything was back to normal. I thought I'd imagined it."

"You didn't imagine it," Merlin said, stopping at the end of the corridor and turning. "The Borleys come from a realm outside of history. They can manipulate tiny pockets of time, bunching minutes together like a wrinkle in a rug and then poking directly through them. You saw its actions, so you remembered them even after it leapt back in time and undid them."

Albus screwed up his face in concentration. He shook his head. "But why would it do that?"

"It's a defensive reflex," Merlin said curtly. "They use it to cover their tracks. It's somewhat akin to a squid squirting ink to confuse its enemy."

"Confused me all right," James nodded.

"So if you can't catch them using magic," Albus asked, "how do you catch them? What do you do with them after you, er, transfix them? You said you needed to go get something. Is it in that bag?"

"Please return to your compartment, boys," Merlin ordered, turning and opening his own compartment. He shouldered the large, black bag. "We will be arriving at the station soon. You should get into your robes."

"Yeah, but—" Albus began but was silenced by the closing of the compartment door. The windows were smoked, blocking any view of the interior.

"Well, *that* was educational," Albus commented as they retraced their steps back along the train's corridors.

James said nothing. He felt rankled by the way he'd been held responsible for the escape of the Borley. How could Merlin have blamed him and allowed Scorpius to get away without even a stern look? James had been looking forward to the start of the school year partly because he had a sort of

rapport with Merlin, the new Headmaster. After all, James had been inadvertently responsible for the famous wizard's return from the distant past. Also, they had worked together at the end of the last term to thwart a cunning plot to cause a war between the Muggle and magical worlds. And yet, even before their arrival at Hogwarts, James seemed to have gotten on Merlin's bad side.

As he and Albus returned to their compartment, James remembered the words Rose had said at the beginning of their trip: a wizard as powerful as Merlin could be all the scarier because he's not evil but just selfish.

But of course that was ridiculous, wasn't it? Merlin wasn't selfish, just different. James knew Merlin as well as anyone did. He'd even been consulted about whether or not the famous wizard would be a good Headmaster. He wasn't dangerous. He was just from a much different time. Merlin had said so himself. He came from a much more serious, grave age. Not only was it important for James to remember that fact, it was important for him to help the rest of the students understand it as well.

By the time Albus yanked the door to their compartment open, it had begun to rain in earnest. The windows of the train were streaked and spattered with huge drops. Ralph was asleep on his seat with his tabloid open on his chest. Rose was buried in her book, barely noticing the brothers' return. And James was becoming rather certain that this year might not be quite as fun as he'd first thought.

As the light began to fade from the day and the rain finally abated, James, Albus, and Ralph dug their robes out of their satchels. Both James and Albus' robes were rather sadly wrinkled. Rose looked up from her book and clucked her tongue at them.

"Haven't you two ever learned how to fold your clothes?"

"Boys don't learn things like that," Albus said, trying to smooth out the front of his robe with his hands. "We learn cool things. Secret boy things that I'm not even allowed to tell you about. Girls get stuck learning how to pack clothes so their husbands look good when they go out to their jobs."

"I'm not even going to respond to that," Rose said, shaking her head sadly. "I only hope your sister is learning her lessons better than you did. The son of a famous woman Quidditch player should know better."

Ralph raised his eyebrows. "I think I know an Anti-Wrinkling Spell. You want me to try it out?"

"No thanks, Ralph," James said quickly, "no offense, but I still remember you burning a bald stripe on Victoire's head last year."

"That was a Disarming Spell," Ralph said defensively. "My wand is a little sensitive about those. The problem isn't getting them to work but keeping them from working too well."

"Hmm!" Rose said pointedly, "I wonder why that might be?"

"So you really tackled him, eh?" Ralph said to Albus, reverting to a former topic.

"Knocked him clean off his feet," James said, nudging his brother. "It was pretty good even if it did get me into trouble."

"You need to learn some self-control, Albus," Rose said, finally putting her book aside. "He may be hard to like, but you are at Hogwarts now. You can't go around tackling everyone who says something you don't like."

"Something I don't like?" Albus said, glaring at Rose. "Did you miss the part where he insulted our dead granddad? There's such a thing as honor, you know! I'll do it again if he so much as looks at me sideways."

"I didn't say you shouldn't retaliate, Albus," Rose said meaningfully. "I just said we're at Hogwarts now. You retaliate with magic."

"Yikes," James said, laughing a little nervously. "The apple really fell far from the tree with *you,* Rosie."

Rose looked hurt. "I may be my mum's daughter, but I'll have you remember that I'm a *Weasley,* too."

Albus grimaced. "Well, I can't do any real magic yet. Besides, it felt so good to knock him down."

Rose shot James a serious look. "Then I hope you're getting your bum in gear. Looks like you'll be spending a lot of the year sitting on your little brother."

"He's his own problem from now on," James said. "Besides, Scorpius deserved it. That stupid twit was trying to Stun Albus. His parents have been teaching him curses already. It's a good thing Albus has a good reach."

"Well, all I can say is I'm going to be doing some research on this Borley creature," Rose said as the train slowed, entering Hogsmeade station.

Albus raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. "You mean there's a magical creature you haven't learned about already?"

"Sounds like trouble to me," Ralph admitted. "If Merlin said the thing had turned dangerous, I'd guess it's definitely something to look out for."

James zipped his satchel and slipped it over his shoulders. "I just want to know why it's been following me around. Why'd it pick me?"

"Obviously, it thought it could trick you into using magic on it," Rose reasoned. "It almost worked too."

"That's why it ran away when you threatened it at the doctor's office," Ralph added, raising his eyebrows. "You said you told it you were a wizard, but that you didn't have your wand with you. It realized there was no point in making a mess if you weren't going to zap it, so it covered its tracks by jumping back a few minutes and undoing everything."

"Yeah, well, aren't you all brilliant?" James grumbled. "I'd like to see how you lot would've handled it if you'd been there. Besides, it was Scorpius and Albus that finally allowed the thing to get a little magical snack and turn all scary."

"Don't blame me," Albus said, still trying to press the wrinkles out of his robes with his hands. "If you'd have attacked Scorpius with me, you could've disarmed him before anything happened. I bet old Merlin would've approved of that."

A few minutes later, the train shuddered to a stop. All around there came the sound of opening doors, footsteps, and chattering, excited voices as the train's occupants filled the corridors, streaming toward the exits. James, Albus, Rose, and Ralph gathered their things and joined the throng.

As they climbed out onto the wet platform of Hogsmeade station, James caught sight of Hagrid standing under a nearby lamppost, barely fitting under it.

"First-years," he called in his great, gruff voice. "First-years, this way! The rest of yeh go an' find the carriages out front. If yeh don' know where to go, follow the ones that do. Step lively now."

James grabbed Albus' robe, stopping him.

"Hey," he said, quietly, "I mean it. Don't worry about the Sorting, little brother."

"I'm not, actually," Albus replied, shrugging. "I remembered something Dad told me back at platform nine and three-quarters."

James blinked. "Well, good. What'd he say?"

"He said that the Sorting Hat will take my wishes into account. He said that if I really don't want to, the Hat won't make me be a Slytherin."

"You, a Slytherin?" Scorpius' voice sneered behind them. James rolled his eyes. He should've known the little squid was the spying sort.

"Get away from us, Scorpius," Albus said, gritting his teeth.

"Or what?" the boy grinned. "Are you going to risk getting your brother into trouble again by rushing me? That only works once, Potter."

Albus nodded. "I'll do that and more if you don't watch yourself."

"That's why you'd never make it into Slytherin," Scorpius said airily, turning to walk away. "As you saw on the train, Slytherins fight with their brains and a wand. Your sort has to rely on brute force. But what do you expect from a son of Harry Potter?"

Albus tensed to lunge at Scorpius again, but James grabbed his shoulder. "Don't you dare go after him again, you dolt. That's just what he wants you to do."

"He's ragging on Dad!" Albus hissed.

"He's trying to provoke you. Save it for later. You've got the whole school year to hate him."

"That's right, Potter," Scorpius said as he turned back, still grinning. "Listen to your brother. He knows what happens when you go up against a Slytherin. Did he tell you what happened when he tried to steal the Slytherin Captain's Quidditch broom last year? Nasty business, that. I hear you ended up facedown in the mud."

James let go of Albus' shoulder, his face flushing with anger. "You just want to watch it, Malfoy. We're not afraid of the Slytherins."

"Then you really are as foolish as you look," Scorpius said, his grin vanishing. "A Malfoy is back in the House of Slytherin again. *We* don't play politics. You best watch yourselves." He glared at the two brothers, then turned, his cloak flapping, and disappeared into the throng.

"Arrogant little nutter, isn't he?" Albus said. James glanced at him and grinned.

"See you in the Great Hall, Al."

"Yeah," Albus replied, nodding toward the carriages. "Have fun with the Thestrals. Don't let them frighten you too much."

"You're the one who has nightmares about them, not me," James said, rolling his eyes. "Like I told you, they're invisible."

Albus simply looked at James, a curious expression on his face.

"What?" James asked.

"Nothing," Albus said quickly. "I was just thinking of something else Dad said on the platform, right before I got on the train."

James stopped and furrowed his brow. "What'd he say?"

Albus shrugged. "He said James might have a little surprise with the Thestrals."

With that, Albus turned, shouldered his pack, and walked toward Hagrid at the far end of the platform.

They weren't invisible; at least not completely. James hung back, sincerely apprehensive to get too close to the horrible-looking, semi-transparent creatures hitched to the carriages. The nearest one beat its great leathery wings slowly. It turned to look at him, its blank white eyes bulging grotesquely.

"You can see them, eh?" a voice asked. James glanced up, startled, and saw the stout face and red cheeks of his friend Damien Damascus. Damien was also looking at the Thestrals, his brow slightly furrowed. "I started seeing them at the beginning of my fourth year. Shocked me good, I'll tell you. I thought the carriages were just magical, that they pulled themselves up to the castle. Noah took me aside and told me all about the Thestrals. He'd been seeing them since his second year. Come on, they're harmless. They're actually kind of cool when you get used to them."

James threw his bag into the carriage and climbed into the rear seat.

"Hi, James," Sabrina said as she heaved herself into the front seat. She still wore a quill in her wavy red hair. It bounced jauntily as she turned to look over her shoulder. "So what was the drama in the train? Merlin looked like he was going to shoot death bolts from his eyes."

James ran his hand through his hair wearily. "Don't remind me. I already got ten points taken from Gryffindor."

"Not the best way to start the year off," Petra Morganstern said, joining Sabrina on the front seat. "That kind of thing can get your fellow Gryffindors a bit peeved. Fortunately, we seventh-years are above being petty about such things."

"Sabrina and I are sixth-years," Damien pointed out. "And I don't know about her, but I'm still as petty as they come. I haven't forgiven you lot for losing us the House Cup last year. To Hufflepuff, of all things."

"You'll forgive us for trying to save the world," Petra said lightly, arranging her robes on the seat. "Besides, I recall you were involved in that escapade as well."

"That may be, but unlike the rest of you, my involvement was never proved. That's why our dear departed Ted saw fit to make me the official Gremlins scapegoat. Allegations just roll right off me."

Sabrina nodded seriously. "I'm glad you found a good use for that oily hide of yours."

There was a sudden jerk and the carriage rolled forward. James looked and saw the ghostly Thestral trotting ahead, pulling the carriage. He squinted at it, trying to see it more clearly.

Damien leaned toward him and asked in a quiet voice, "So who died?"

"What?" James blurted, turning to look at the bigger boy. He lowered his own voice and asked, "How'd you know?"

"My aunt died when I was in my third year," Damien replied. "It was silly, really. Broom accident on her way back from visiting my grandparents. Mum warned her not to fly with a storm coming on, but Aunt Aggie always thought she was indestructible. She stayed alive in St. Mungo's long enough for us all to get there and see her. She died while I was there, in the room. When I came back the next year, I saw the Thestrals for the first time. I thought I was going daft until Noah pulled me aside and told me about them. He said that they become visible to anyone who has witnessed and accepted a death. So who died?"

James sat back in his seat and took a deep breath. "My Granddad Weasley," he said in a soft voice. "He had a heart attack."

Damien raised his eyebrows. "Old Arthur Weasley?"

"You knew him?"

"Well, not in person," he replied, "but he was the father-in-law of your dad, and let's face it, your dad's a celebrity. Besides, Arthur Weasley faced Voldy's snake, didn't he? Not bad for a Ministry quillpusher! Lots of people know about that. They say that it proves courage is more important than magic when it comes to the sticking point."

James looked at Damien, surprised. "Do they really?"

"Sure they do," Damien said. "I mean, the people who say that are also the kind of people who buy Hair-growth Charms and read The Quibbler, but still, yeah, they say it all right."

James looked back out at the hazy shape of the Thestral. It trotted along, pulling the carriage easily despite the fact that it looked skinny enough to break in half.

"Why is it only partly visible?" James finally asked.

"Is it?" Damien leaned forward. "Looks solid enough to me."

"I can see the street right through it," James said, shuddering.

"Well, like I said," Damien replied, settling back in his seat as the great castle rose over the nearby trees, "the Thestrals become visible to anyone who has seen and accepted a death. It doesn't sound like you saw your granddad die with your own eyes like I did with my aunt, but he meant enough to

you for it to mean the same thing."

"We were waiting for him to come home," James replied hollowly. "We were just waiting for him to come through the Floo. Somebody did, but it wasn't Granddad. It was the messenger telling us he'd died."

"So you went from believing he was right there with you, to the knowledge of his death, all in a matter of seconds," Damien said, nodding. "That was close enough to give you a half-look at the Thestrals. But I don't think that's all there is to it. Sounds like you haven't quite accepted it yet either, have you?"

James sighed, not answering. Instead, he looked up at the sprawling, monstrous shape of the castle as it loomed ahead. Its myriad windows were lit against the misty, cloudy evening. James thought he could see the Gryffindor Tower, where his bed was waiting for him. It was nice to be back even if things did feel very different. It had felt that way ever since the funeral, just knowing that Granddad was no longer out there somewhere, like he'd always been. No, James realized, he hadn't accepted Granddad's death. Not yet. And what was more, he didn't want to. It didn't feel fair to Granddad. Accepting his death felt like giving up on him.

For a moment, James wondered if Albus felt the same way, and then he remembered how Albus had attacked Scorpius in the corridor of the train, tackling him and yelling "Take it back! Take it back right now!" Albus hadn't accepted Granddad's death either. It just looked different in him, mainly because Albus had now found someone at whom to point his anger and grief. It probably wasn't the healthiest way to manage things, but James couldn't think of anything better. To be sure, Scorpius made it rather easy for Albus to hate him. James had grown up with Albus, and he knew just how passionate the boy could be. Thinking that, James didn't know whether to despise Scorpius or pity him.

James marveled at time's ability to alter one's perception. Merely one year earlier, he had entered the Great Hall for the first time, filled with apprehension and worry. Now he threw himself happily into the noise of the gathered students, greeting friends he hadn't seen all summer and being welcomed into the hearty fracas of the Gryffindor table. The floating candles filled the hall with warmth and light, forming an exciting contrast against the sullen grey clouds represented on the room's ceiling. Peeves swooped randomly throughout the candles, blowing raspberries on the tiny flames in an effort to put them out, but they simply relit themselves with small pops as he passed. James sat down at the Gryffindor table and grabbed a handful of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans from a nearby bowl. Bravely, he popped one into his mouth without checking the color. A moment later, he screwed up his face, not quite daring to spit the candy out.

"You'll want to be especially careful with those, James," a fellow second-year, Graham Warton, called. "Those were provided free of charge by your pals at Weasleys'. They partnered with Bertie Bott's for a whole new line of novelty flavors, and we get to be the test market."

"What is it?" James managed to say, swallowing the horrid bean and grabbing a pitcher of pumpkin juice.

"Judging by the color of your tongue, I'd say that one was Lemon-Lima-Bean," Graham said, squinting studiously. "There's also Mint-Chocolate-Chipmunk and Peanut-Pickle-Brittle."

"Damien just ate one of the Steak-and-Kidney-Stone beans!" Noah Metzker called from the end of the table, pointing. "Everybody, duck! I think he's going to blow!"

James couldn't help laughing as Damien struggled to swallow the bean. Petra pounded him gravely on the back until Damien shoved her away, lunging for his goblet.

A hush rippled over the rowdy students and James looked up to see Merlin approach the huge podium on the hall's dais. He had donned a blazing red robe with a high golden collar, and James recognized it as Merlin's rather ancient version of a dress robe. The sleeves and collar of the robe were encrusted with braided scrollwork that glittered with actual gold and jewels. The giant man's beard glistened with oil and he carried his staff with him, knocking it pointedly on the floor as he approached. He was so tall that he made the podium appear small. He leaned over it slightly, his eyes unreadable as they roamed over the silenced assembly.

"Greetings, students and faculty of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," he said slowly, his deep voice echoing all round. "My name is Merlinus Ambrosius, and if you have somehow managed not to learn of it on the wizarding wireless or in the newspapers, I am the new Headmaster of this institution. As such, I will expect to hear no more of the rather distressing verbal tendency of this age to use my name as an oath or an expression of amazement. You should know that neither I nor my underpants find it the least bit amusing."

James knew that the comment would have been funny if Merlin hadn't said it with such pointed gravity. He glared out at the assembly of students, daring anyone to so much as chuckle. Apparently satisfied, he straightened and smiled disarmingly.

"Very well, then. As Headmaster, I succeed Madam Minerva McGonagall, who, as you can see, has deigned to remain at the school to serve as my advisor and to continue in her duties as Professor of Transfiguration."

There was a burst of applause, which seemed to take Merlin off guard. He blinked out over the crowd, and then smiled slightly. The applause grew to a sustained ovation and Merlin stepped back from the podium, acknowledging the former Headmistress. On the floor before the podium, the first-years were lining up behind Professor Longbottom. James saw Albus and Rose, both of whom were looking around the room in awe. Rose glanced up at the dais just as the newly retitled Professor McGonagall pushed her chair back. She stood and raised one hand, smiling tightly. On the floor, Rose

elbowed Albus and pointed.

"Thank you," McGonagall called over the sound of the applause, trying to drown it out. "Thank you, this is all very kind, but I know you all too well not to know that at least some of you are applauding my long-awaited departure for your own reasons entirely. Still, the sentiment is quite appreciated."

Laughter rounded out the applause as Professor McGonagall settled back into her chair. Merlin approached the podium again.

"Besides finding yourselves with a new Headmaster, those of you who are returning this year will find several more changes. Not the least of these is the installation of our new Wizard Literature professor, Juliet Knowles Revalvier, who is herself an accomplished writer, as many of you may know. Additionally, allow me to introduce to you your new Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Kendrick Debellows."

A wave of awed whispering filled the hall as a large man half-rose from his seat on the dais. He smiled a huge, winning smile and raised his hand. James remembered him from the train. He was the man who'd passed him and Albus when they'd been looking for the Borley. James hadn't recognized him then, but he did now. His hair was going grey and cut severely short, and he had gained rather a lot of weight in the years since his famous exploits as leader of the Harriers, the wizarding world's elite special forces squadron. Across the room, at the Slytherin table, James saw Ralph looking puzzled. His friend Trenton was leaning over to him, apparently explaining who Kendrick Debellows was. On the floor below the dais, James saw Scorpius Malfoy turn away, his face vaguely disgusted.

"I've got a whole collection of Debellows action figures at home," James heard Noah whisper meaningfully. "I collected them when I was little. I used to sic them on Steven's cat until one of them nearly tied its tail in a knot."

"I see many of you are familiar with Professor Debellows," Merlin commented from the podium. "I trust you will therefore find his classes interesting as well as challenging. And now I believe we will witness one of this school's longest and most important traditions: the Sorting of our newest students into their houses. Professor McGonagall, if you would do us the honors."

Exactly as last year, a wooden stool had been placed on the dais. Atop it, the worn and ancient Sorting Hat sat, looking like nothing more than a dusty cast-off from a forgotten wardrobe. James knew that in his parents' day, and for centuries before, the Hat had sung a song prior to each year's Sorting. Last year, however, the Hat had not produced a song. James hadn't thought about it much; he'd merely assumed that after all those centuries the Hat deserved the occasional break. Now, the ancient Hat stirred on its stool, apparently preparing to sing. The fold that formed the mouth seemed to open, to take a deep breath, and then the Hat's high, lilting voice filled the waiting silence.

"A thousand years and more have I resided at my post

And watched the tide of years forever ebb upon my host Fair Hogwarts alters not despite the weight of ages raging

For Hogwarts knows that time revolves, while she is only aging The rise of villains coincides, to keep the balance rightly

With dawning heroes in whose eyes good justice blazes brightly In recent past, dread Voldemort rose up with might so scary

That fate did send a hero boy, the orphan Potter, Harry And thus unveiled the drama of time's everlasting scheme

The players change, the venues shift, but constant is the theme The root of evil always finds a new and fertile garden

But valor's heart is ever strong to bring us fate's good pardon And this, you see, brings us to me, the Hat that does the Sorting,

For 'tis my task to keep the balance right for evil thwarting For witnessed I the dawn of that long battle that endures

And long as that old struggle lasts, my duty hope ensures

I see the seed that guarantees the role of every student

And place them best into the House that grows that seed most prudent In Hufflepuff, the seed of loyalty and diligence

For Ravenclaw, the vine of knowledge grows with common sense Brave Gryffindor breeds valor and courageousness of heart

And Slytherin gives those who love ambition their good start They go there hence into their House as sign of their vocation

But many sense it gives a hint of deeper motivation

Make no mistake, judge not the one upon their house of Sorting

But always look instead to gauge the way of their comporting

For good can come of any House, regardless of its banner

And evil, too, can spread its leaves within the finest manor Beneath my brim now come and sit to hear my declaration

But be assured, you bring along your heart's own inclination It matters not what happens while you sit upon this chair

The true judge of your character is what's beneath your hair."

As the Sorting Hat finished its song, the Hall erupted into applause. James grinned, craning to look across the room toward Ralph, who smiled back a little sheepishly. If anyone needed to hear the Hat's most recent song, it was Ralph, whose assignment to Slytherin had been a source of rather constant consternation during the previous year. As the applause died away, Professor McGonagall approached the Hat, producing a long parchment from her robes. She unrolled it and studied it through her tiny spectacles. She nodded to herself, lowered the parchment, and picked up the Sorting Hat by its tip.

"Cameron Creevey," she announced loudly. "Please join me on the dais."

A very small, very nervous-looking boy climbed the steps and clambered onto the stool. There's no way I looked that young and scared when I sat on that stool, James thought to himself, smiling. He remembered it very well: the voice of the magical Hat in his head considering him, debating which house would best suit him. It had been a close call. Moments before he'd climbed the dais, as then-Headmistress McGonagall had called his name, the Slytherin table had broken out in applause. A beautiful, albeit severe-looking, darkhaired girl named Tabitha Violetus Corsica had led the applause, and as James looked back on the memory, he thought for the first time that the Slytherins' applause had merely been a ruse, intended to sway him into accepting an assignment to Slytherin. As scared as he'd been, as worried as he'd been about the responsibility of following in his famous father's footsteps, James had almost fallen for it. For a fleeting moment, under the brim of the Sorting Hat, James had considered becoming a Slytherin, and the Hat had concurred. Only at the last second had James firmed his resolve, proving that he meant to be a Gryffindor, like his parents before him.

"Gryffindor!" the Sorting Hat proclaimed. Professor McGonagall lifted the Hat from Creevey's head as the Gryffindor table exploded into cheers. Cameron Creevey grinned in obvious relief as he ran down the steps. He crammed into the front of the table, sitting between Damien and a seventh-year named Hugo Paulson.

"Thomas Danforth," Professor McGonagall called, reading from her parchment. A moment later, the Ravenclaw table cheered as the bespectacled boy smiled sheepishly, joining his new housemates. As the Sorting continued, James glanced around the hall, picking out all the faces he knew. There was Victoire, sitting resplendently amidst her seventh-year Hufflepuff friends. Gennifer Tellus and Horace Birch whispered to each other at the end of the Ravenclaw table, and James remembered Zane telling him that they had begun seeing each other over the summer. Across the room, Tabitha Corsica sat smiling politely, her hands folded neatly on the table in front of her. On her left sat Philia Goyle, whose bricklike face was as expressionless as ever. Tom Squallus sat on Tabitha's right, his blonde hair combed neatly and his eyes almost unnaturally bright and alert. It almost looked like the trio of Slytherins were up to something, but James reminded himself that they always looked like that. They were probably just waiting for the Sorting of their new mate—

"Scorpius Malfoy," Professor McGonagall called, lowering her parchment and glancing down at the remaining first-years. Scorpius curled the corner of his mouth as he turned. He climbed the steps and sat jauntily on the stool, one leg kicked out in front of him. The Hat threw his face into shadow as Professor McGonagall lowered it.

Several seconds went by. The room had become rather restless as the older students got bored with the ceremony, but they silenced again as the pause grew longer. The Hat sat perfectly still on Scorpius' head. Scorpius himself didn't move. James looked around, surprised at the delay. Everybody knew that the Malfoys were Slytherins. Their family was known to have been among Voldemort's strongest supporters. Lucius Malfoy, Scorpius' grandfather, was said to still be in hiding for crimes he'd committed as a Death Eater, although James' dad had denied it. "He just likes to believe he's the most wanted man in the wizarding world," Harry had chuckled to Ginny one morning over breakfast. "His worst punishment is living in a world where his idol is dead." Still, there couldn't be any question about a Malfoy's house, could there? They nearly defined what it was to *be* a Slytherin. Perhaps something was wrong with the Hat. James nudged Graham, who glanced at him and shrugged curiously.

"Gryffindor!" the Sorting Hat suddenly sang out, pointing its peak at the ceiling.

Complete, stunned silence filled the hall as the Hat was lifted from Scorpius' head. His chin drooped and he closed his eyes. After a long moment, he climbed off the stool and clumped slowly down the stairs. The Gryffindor table remained absolutely silent as Scorpius approached it. He passed the head of the table, where most of the newly named Gryffindors sat staring, wide-eyed. James watched as Scorpius stalked the entire length of the table, not raising his eyes. When he reached the end, he stopped for a moment, apparently unwilling to actually sit down. Finally, he slumped onto a bench on the end. He raised his eyes, and James saw that they were tinged with red. Scorpius glared at James. After a long moment, he pressed his lips together and turned his gaze to the front of the hall.

"Albus Potter," McGonagall called into the silence. James couldn't help glancing aside at the Slytherin table. Tabitha wasn't rising to applaud this time. Strangely though, she was still smiling her polite smile, apparently completely unperturbed by Malfoy's Sorting.

Albus looked back over his shoulder as he climbed the steps to the dais. James assumed he was looking at him; he smiled encouragingly and nodded to his brother up on the dais. Albus showed no sign that he'd seen him. He approached the stool and stared down at it for a moment. Professor McGonagall nodded curtly to him. Albus squared his shoulders, turned, and sat down.

There was no idle chatter now as the Sorting Hat settled onto Albus' head. Every eye in the room watched. Everyone knew that Albus was going to go to Gryffindor. James had only ever joked about it because he was so sure it *was* only a joke. A Potter could never really be sent to Slytherin. But as James thought that, he remembered the look of hate on Albus' face when Malfoy had insulted him on the Hogsmeade platform. Albus had always been a passionate boy. That could be a very good thing, a beautiful thing. But, as James had very recently thought, it could also be a little scary. Too late, James realized that Albus had not turned to look back at him, James, when he'd climbed the stairs to his Sorting. He'd turned to look back at Scorpius, to make sure he was watching. He wanted to make sure Scorpius wouldn't miss what was about to happen.

"Slytherin!" the Hat proclaimed loudly. There was a sustained, collective gasp, filling the hall. Professor McGonagall raised the Hat from Albus' head, and even she seemed surprised at the

pronouncement.

Albus was grinning happily, but he wasn't looking at the table belonging to his new house, which had erupted into wild applause. Albus was looking down the length of the Gryffindor table. James didn't need to follow his brother's gaze to know who he was looking at, but he did anyway.

Scorpius Malfoy stared back at Albus, his eyes baleful, his mouth a grim, white line of pure hatred.

4. Trial of the Golden Cord

As dinner appeared on the tables and the assembly began to eat, James couldn't help craning to see what was happening at the Slytherin table. Albus was seated next to Ralph, but he was deep in animated conversation with Trenton Bloch, Ralph's best Slytherin friend. As James watched, the two boys erupted into raucous laughter. Even Ralph was smiling and nodding as he gnawed a chicken leg.

"Something wrong with your neck, James?" Graham asked around a mouthful of stew.

"I'm just trying to see what's going on," James said. "It just isn't right! Albus can't be a Slytherin!"

Rose, beaming about her own Sorting into Gryffindor House, leaned toward James. "You keep on saying that, but as I recall, you were the one winding him up all summer about becoming exactly that."

"Well, yeah, but I was never serious!"

Graham followed James' gaze, peering across the hall to the table under the green banner. "Looks like he's having a grand time of it. Even Corsica is talking to him."

"Well," James exclaimed stridently, "she would, wouldn't she? She was trying to make all nice with me last year as well, up until she called my dad a liar in front of the whole school. She's probably just as pleased as can be that they've got a Potter in Slytherin. Who knows what kind of propaganda she'll fill his head with? It'll be her crowning achievement."

"Albus can take care of himself, James," Noah said dismissively. "Besides, you said yourself you were almost sent to Slytherin last year."

"I should go check on him," James said, moving to stand. Damien reached over and pushed him back into his seat.

"Let him be," Damien said. "He looks to be doing just fine."

"But he's in Slytherin!" James cried, exasperated. "He can't go to Slytherin! He's a Potter!"

"You want to talk about surprises," Rose said, lowering her voice, "even as we speak, a Malfoy is

sitting at the end of the Gryffindor table."

James had nearly forgotten about Scorpius. He turned, following Rose's glance. Scorpius wasn't eating. The Gryffindors nearest him were studiously ignoring him, laughing and joking loudly. Scorpius caught James looking at him. He narrowed his eyes and smiled grotesquely, making a parody of those around him. Then he rolled his eyes and turned away.

"That's the one that really baffles me," Graham muttered. "How's a greasy git like him end up a Gryffindor?"

Rose reached for another roll. "You don't know what's in his heart," she said. "The Sorting Hat sees who you really are, not what your family has always been. Maybe there's more to Scorpius Malfoy than meets the eye."

James shook his head. "Not a chance. I heard the way he talked about Granddad. He's horrible. Besides, he was as proud as a peacock about his Slytherin heritage."

"None of that makes him a Slytherin," Rose commented carefully.

"That's true," Damien concurred. "Being nasty isn't necessarily a ticket into Slytherin. Like the Hat said, Slytherins are usually known for ambition. Maybe after a few decades of backing the losing horse, guys like Malfoy are finding raw ambition a little harder to come by."

"So that makes him Gryffindor material?" Graham asked disgustedly. "I can barely stand to look at him. What's Gryffindor about him?"

Nobody had any response to that. James couldn't help glancing aside again, looking down the length of the table to where Scorpius sat. The boy looked completely disinterested and aloof, but James knew it was a façade. He'd seen the expression on Scorpius' face when he first sat down at the Gryffindor table. James remembered his own fears on the night of his Sorting, worried that he'd not make it into Gryffindor, that he'd disappoint his family and fail to live up to the expectations of the son of Harry Potter. Was Scorpius dealing with the same sort of situation in reverse? James suspected he was, but his pride wouldn't let him show it. And then there was Albus, who, to James' complete amazement, had apparently allowed the Sorting Hat to send him to Slytherin just to spite Scorpius.

Without planning it, James climbed off the bench. He walked to the end of the table and stopped next to Scorpius. The pale boy pretended not to notice him.

"Well," James began, not entirely sure what to say, "looks like we're going to be housemates."

Scorpius still didn't look at James. He seemed to be gazing out over the other tables, his eyes halflidded, as if bored.

"I suppose we didn't get off too well, back on the train," James continued. He felt the eyes of the rest of the table upon him, and he hoped that this was a good idea. "But since we're going to be living in

the same rooms for the rest of the year, I thought maybe it'd be best just to start over. Welcome to Gryffindor, Scorpius."

James stuck his hand out, the same way he'd seen Scorpius' dad do it when he'd spoken to Harry at the funeral. Scorpius was still staring idly out over the hall. Slowly, he turned his head, looking disdainfully at James' proffered hand.

"Well, that's very sweet, Potter, but don't go wasting your manners on me," Scorpius said, allowing a crooked grin to curl his lip. "We may have to share a house, but that doesn't make us mates. You think I'm all broken-hearted at not being selected for Slytherin? Well, you're wrong. I'm perfectly happy being a Gryffindor. In fact, I consider it a golden opportunity. I intend to prove to you what it really means to be a Gryffindor. After all these years of sloppy heroics and lucky breaks, I might just show you what courage really looks like."

James realized he still had his hand sticking out. "Yeah," he replied, dropping his arm to his side. "Well, good luck with that, then. Have it your way." He turned away, but Scorpius spoke again, stopping him.

"I'm not so sure about little Albus as a Slytherin though," he said conversationally. "At first, I was concerned they might just eat him alive. But now it looks like I was wrong. Little Potter boy might have a bit more Slytherin in him than I thought. ASP, indeed."

James looked back at Scorpius, who was still grinning crookedly. "I thought you didn't even know our first names."

Scorpius shrugged languidly. "I guess I was lying," he replied. "That was back when I thought I was going to be a Slytherin. Now that I'm a member of the scarlet and gold, I'll make it a point to always be truthful, won't I?"

Amazingly, a few of the Gryffindors chuckled at that. Scorpius reached for his goblet and raised it, as if saluting.

"Here's to new legacies," he announced, raising one eyebrow sardonically. "There's a toast you can agree with, right, Potter?"

James finally caught up with Albus as he was leaving the Great Hall in the company of his new housemates. Albus appeared to be quite popular among the Slytherins as they gathered around him, laughing raucously.

"Really, it's not all it's cracked up to be," Albus was saying. "I mean sure, growing up the son of the most famous wizard in the world has its perks, but it doesn't get me any special privileges here at Hogwarts. Especially with you lot, eh?"

There was another round of laughter. Obviously, Albus was making the most of his rather shocking house assignment. James shouldered his way into the crowd and grabbed Albus' elbow.

"Hey, easy, big brother," Albus called as James pulled him away. "This is my brother, James, everybody. He gets his bossiness from Mum's side of the family. Don't start the party without me, eh?"

Albus turned back to James near the base of the stairs. He pulled his elbow out of James' grip, his face turning annoyed. "What's the big idea, James? I want to see my new rooms."

"Slytherin!" James hissed, glancing back over his shoulder at the waiting gang of students. Tabitha Corsica smiled crookedly and nodded in his direction.

"Yeah, Slytherin," Albus shrugged. "Same as you've been saying all summer."

James turned back. "Don't pretend I talked you into this, Al. You knew I was just ribbing you. Tell me the truth. Did you do this just to spite Scorpius?"

Albus rolled his eyes. "Get off my back, James. How was I to know Malfoy was going to get Sorted into Gryffindor?"

"I saw the way you looked back at him when you went up to the dais. You wanted to show him up! That's a stupid reason to go to Slytherin. Come on, Al! This affects your whole school life! You're a *Slytherin*, now!"

"I didn't choose this, you know," Albus said, lowering his voice and looking James in the eye. "The Sorting Hat does the Sorting. That's what it's for, James."

"But Dad said—"

"Yeah, well, maybe things have changed. Or maybe the Hat didn't think I wanted to be a Gryffindor bad enough. Either way, when I put it on, the only thing that came into my head was a vision of me in the house of the green and silver. And the truth is, for the first time ever, I kind of liked it."

James frowned. "But all summer long, you were completely dotty about it. I mean really, Al, I wouldn't have wound you up so much about it if it hadn't gotten such a rise out of you."

Albus shrugged and looked around, taking in the stairway and the Entrance Hall. "Maybe I did it just to spite you, then. That'll teach you to rag on me about stuff. I might just go and do it after all, eh?"

James grimaced, exasperated.

"Don't get your knickers in a twist, James," Albus said, clapping James on the shoulder. "Time's have

changed, haven't they? The other thing Dad told me on the platform was that if I *did* become a Slytherin, they'd have gotten themselves a brilliant new member. You can be king of Gryffindor House, all right? I'll work my magic in Slytherin and we'll have all of Hogwarts by the tail."

James shook his head but smiled a little. "You are the boldest little twonk ever, Al. I almost believe you. Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Not in the least," Albus nodded gravely. "But it's never stopped me before. Listen, don't tell Mum and Dad about this yet. I want to tell them myself, right?"

James grimaced. "What do you think I am, a squealer?"

"Well, you did squeal on Ted and Victoire at the station this morning."

"I told you—"

Albus raised his hands, backing away. "That's between you and your conscience, big brother. I best be getting back to my new housemates. Ralph says they have sweet broom cakes and real Turkish Delight down there first night. I can't wait to have that flagon of Butterbeer in front of the snake's head fireplace, eh?"

James sighed as Albus rejoined his new housemates heading down into the cellars. As he turned to climb the staircase, he was met by Rose.

"Ralph says he'll keep an eye on Albus," Rose said reassuringly. "Frankly, Slytherin probably is a better fit for him. He's always been a bit of a wild horse, you know."

"Yeah, I know," James agreed. "I just didn't expect it to really happen. It feels really weird having a Potter in Slytherin."

"Are you jealous?"

"What?" James exclaimed, looking sideways at Rose as they reached the landing. "Why in the world would I be jealous?"

Rose shrugged noncommittally. "I hear the Gremlins have a little something planned for tonight."

"How do you know about that already?"

"Well," Rose replied self-deprecatingly, "it was partly my idea. They liked it so much they asked me to come along. In all fairness though, it wouldn't have been possible without you."

James remembered last year's first night when the Gremlins had bewitched him to look like a green alien and convinced him to clamber out of a makeshift flying saucer, much to the amazement of a local Muggle farmer. "They aren't still raising the Wocket are they?"

"No, apparently they retired the Wocket when Ted graduated. Muggle-baiting is pretty tasteless, really, and besides, it's not much good now that the Headmaster has seen it and knows where it was hidden."

"You sure know an awful lot about this, Rose."

"Apparently, being a Weasley carries a lot of weight in certain circles," she replied happily.

As they entered the common room, James couldn't help smiling. The familiar babble of laughter and conversation filled the room like a cauldron. The bust of Godric Gryffindor swooped dangerously overhead as a group of fifth- and sixth-years played Winkles and Augers with it. Cameron Creevey had already arrived and was sitting with a few other new Gryffindors on a sofa near the crackling fireplace. Cameron noticed James and his eyes widened a little. He nudged the girl next to him.

"Hey, James," Heth Thomas, one of Gryffindor's Beaters, called from across the room. "You going to try out for the Quidditch team again this year? We're taking odds on how big a hole you'll make in the pitch."

"I'd be careful getting in on that action," James replied, grinning. "I've been practicing this summer."

"Right," Graham interjected, "whenever you weren't grounded from your broom by your dad, I hear."

This was greeted with hoots of good-natured laughter. James made a sarcastic mime of laughing along. The truth of it was that he enjoyed the ribbing. He was looking forward to the try-outs. The more they expected him to repeat last year's performance, the better he'd look.

Noah, Petra, Damien, and Sabrina were crowded around a table in the corner of the rowdy common room. Damien and Sabrina were busily hunched over a large sheet of parchment, quills in their hands. They appeared to be arguing in hushed tones, pointing at bits of the parchment. Noah and Petra looked up and waved James and Rose over.

"We've not got much time," Noah said. "But fortunately, that's Damien and Sabrina's problem. Besides, what can go wrong? We've got a Weasley back at Hogwarts again. All is well with the world."

"How do you spell 'forsooth'?" Sabrina asked without looking up.

"It won't matter," Damien said tersely, "if we don't know, nobody will."

"What's the plan?" James asked, plopping into a chair nearby.

Noah looked at Rose, then back at James. "We think it'd be best if you didn't know. For now."

"You'll thank us later, James," Rose agreed.

"What?" James said, frowning. "Why in the world shouldn't I know?"

"Trust us, James," Petra said. "It'll be much better for you if you can honestly claim ignorance."

"That's what Ted said last year at the debate, too," James grumbled. He opened his mouth to protest further, but a sudden change in the atmosphere distracted him. Someone else was entering the common room. James glanced around to see who it was.

Scorpius Malfoy clambered awkwardly through the portrait hole, getting his robes caught on the uneven bricks. He straightened and yanked at his robes, irritated. Finally, he turned and took in the room, his pale face grim.

"Quaint," he drawled. "How perfectly whimsical. I expect we'll be roasting marshmallows over the fireplace and singing happy sing-alongs round about midnight, yes? Perhaps someone could point me in the direction of the dormitories."

"Oi," Graham answered, hooking a thumb over his shoulder. "It's up those stairs, Malfoy. We'll save you a marshmallow."

James watched Scorpius hoist his satchel and stalk across the floor, threading between the suddenly silent students that filled the room. Hugo Paulson, a huge seventh year, was lounging in a high-back chair with his legs sprawled in front of him, blocking Scorpius' path. Scorpius stopped, waiting for Hugo to move. Hugo pretended to notice Malfoy for the first time. He grinned and moved his legs. Scorpius rolled his eyes and continued on.

James knew he should warn Scorpius, but he couldn't quite bring himself to do it. The rest of the Gryffindors watched with bright, avid eyes as the pale boy scowled once back over his shoulder, and then disappeared into the dimness of the staircase.

He made it to the fourth step before the alarm sounded. The stair steps flattened, transforming into a rough stone slide. Scorpius struggled for purchase on the smooth surface, but it was no use. He slid back down into the common room and crashed to the floor. There was a roar of laughter. Hugo jumped up, braying uproariously, and grabbed Scorpius' arm, hoisting him to his feet.

"The age-old girls' dorm swap. We should really get some signs, shouldn't we? It's all in good fun, Malfoy," Hugo announced, clapping the boy on the back. "We got to initiate you somehow, don't we?"

Scorpius retrieved his satchel and shot a look of cold fury at Graham. Without a word, he stalked back across the room to the opposite staircase.

"That was mean," Rose said mildly after Scorpius had gone.

"He took it better than I expected, really," Noah commented. "Knowing his kind, I'd have thought he'd Avada Kedavra somebody just for spite."

"He's probably up there putting the Cruciatus Curse on some spiders even now," Graham replied.

"Stop it, all of you," Petra said. "You're as bad as they are. There's a very good reason that the Sorting Hat sent him here. Give him a chance to prove it."

"It was just a joke, Petra," Graham muttered. "Hugo did worse to me at least once a week last year."

Gradually, the babble of voices returned to the room. Damien and Sabrina went back to their strange, hushed work. Rose leaned over to James.

"Do you think Petra's right?" she asked quietly. "Do you think he really does belong in Gryffindor?"

James thought back to last year when Ralph had gotten sorted into Slytherin. James had been certain that it had been a mistake. Now, knowing more about Ralph, he saw that the Hat might have known best after all.

He answered Rose, "Hagrid says the Hat knows what it's doing. I mean, you can't fool the Sorting Hat, can you?"

Rose didn't seem convinced. "Somebody fooled the Goblet of Fire, back in our parents' day. Anything's possible."

"But why would he want to come to Gryffindor?"

Rose shrugged. "I just hope he really is the real thing. Because if he's not, things are going to get very ugly. Especially after tonight."

"What's that mean?" James asked suspiciously.

Rose ignored him. "Why don't you run up and check on him?"

"Blimey, Rose! First, Cousin Lucy guilts me about how I'm supposed to look after Albus, now you want me to go nursemaid Scorpius-bleeding-Malfoy?"

"Just do it, James. By the time you come back, I bet Damien and Sabrina will be done and it'll be time to go."

"Sheesh," James said, climbing to his feet. "I'd never have pegged you for fancying the bad boy type."

"I don't fancy him," she frowned. "Just make sure he's going to be busy up there for a while, why don't you?"

James grumbled to himself as he crossed to the boys' dormitory stairs.

"It's just James. Don't stun me or anything," he called up as he climbed the steps. To his surprise, he found Scorpius in the second years' dormitory rather than the first years'. "Hey! That's my bed!"

James stopped at the top of the staircase, pointing. Scorpius had shoved James' trunk aside

haphazardly and put his own trunk at the foot of the bed. He glanced up dismissively as he unpacked his things.

"Is it really?" Scorpius replied indolently. "Does it have your name on it?"

"As a matter of fact, it bloody well does," James exclaimed. "I carved it right there on the headboard plain as the nose on your pasty white face!"

"Where?" Scorpius said, squinting at the headboard. He produced his wand from his robes and aimed it lazily with his wrist. A flash of purple light burst across the head of the bed. When it was gone, James' name had vanished, buried under an ugly black burn mark. "I don't see it. Maybe you're a bit confused."

Scorpius turned, looking about the room. He pointed his wand again, producing another flash of purple light.

"There," he said, turning back to his trunk. "Now that bed has your name on it. Happy?"

James stalked over to a bed on the opposite side of the room. Glowing purple letters were scrawled across the headboard. In gothic script, they spelled 'WHINY POTTER GIT'.

"Look, you can't just…," James began, and then stopped, leaning in toward the letters. "And how'd you even do that? That was a nonverbal spell!"

"Is this better?" Scorpius asked, pointing his wand once more. "Mobiliarcha."

James' trunk shot across the floor, barely missing his legs. It struck the bed and burst open, belching half of James' things. Scorpius grinned crookedly as he levitated his books out of his own trunk. He floated them neatly into position on the windowsill.

James spluttered, "Look, Malfoy, this isn't even your dorm! You're a first year! You can't just move in wherever you want!"

"Seems that the first years' dorm is unusually full this year," Malfoy replied without looking at James. "My fellow first year Gryffindors informed me that I'd have to find lodging elsewhere. Frankly, I don't care where I stay in this benighted tower, but if my being here annoys you, then I believe I'll stay. If you don't like it, speak to the headmaster. He's a mate of yours, after all, isn't he?"

"They were just winding you up, you prat," James exclaimed hopelessly.

"Is it time for the sing-along yet?" Scorpius asked, finally glancing at James and pocketing his wand. "Or did you just come up to see how a wizard unpacks?"

James turned on his heels and tramped angrily down the stairs.

"If whatever you have in mind has anything to do with Malfoy," he said as he plopped back into the

chair near the table, "it's probably too nice."

"That's the spirit," Damien replied without looking up from his parchment. James peered at it. He could see that Damien and Sabrina were drawing something, but it was covered in arrows, geometric scribbles, and scrawled notes.

"We can thank old Professor Stonewall for this one," Noah grinned. "Who says Technomancy has no practical purpose? Come on, it's time."

"If we still had your dad's Cloak, we wouldn't need a lookout," Damien explained reasonably. "But since we don't, that's your job."

Sabrina was virtually bouncing with excitement. The quill in her thick hair wobbled. "I'm going down to the landing," she announced quietly. "Catch up as soon as you can. You have to do the scriptey part."

Damien nodded. Noah, Rose, Petra, and Sabrina darted down the stairs at the end of the corridor.

James sighed. "Fine, I'm the lookout. What do I do if somebody comes?"

"All right, this is your story: you were going to the bathroom and you got lost," Damien replied. "Pretend that you're doubled over with the runs or something. Groan a lot, really loud. We'll hear you and know someone is coming."

James was appalled. "That is so wrong on so many levels! For one thing, I'm a second-year! How is it I got lost on the way to the bathroom?"

"Use your imagination," Damien said blandly. "Maybe you have to go so bad that you're delirious or something. Just be sure to groan really loud so we can hear you."

James opened his mouth to protest but Damien was already trotting down the stairs as lightly as he could. Resigning himself to his duty, James leaned against the wall and watched. He still didn't know what the Gremlins were up to, but he knew it had something to do with the new Heracles window. That was what Rose had meant when she'd said they couldn't have done it without him. He had broken that window last year, knocking a Muggle intruder through it during a midnight chase. Filch had fumed that there'd be no way to replace the window, and he'd been right. Fortunately, magic being what it is, it wasn't necessary to manufacture a perfect duplicate. The school had simply procured a special kind of stained glass window with magically imprintable glass. Petra explained that the window could be

charmed so that the glass represented any desired pattern. Filch, being rather a traditionalist, had seen to it that the window represented the old Heracles window right down to the crack in Heracles' right little finger.

James determined to get a peek at what the Gremlins were doing to the window. Carefully, he straightened and tiptoed to the edge of the staircase. He could hear Sabrina and Damien whispering animatedly, but he couldn't see anything. James turned to go back to his hiding place and ran face-first into Merlin's beard.

"Bleah!" James spat, recoiling. "What are you trying to do, sneaking up on a bloke like that?"

Merlin's face was as impassive as ever. "I take it you are on sentinel duty, Mr. Potter?"

James deflated. "I was until I got a face full of beard. What is that stuff you put in it? Smells like the stuff Mum cleans pots with."

"Fear not, Mr. Potter. I shall assure anyone who asks that you were positively prostrate with bowel difficulties. I came to ask a small favor of you. You do not have to do it, but if you do, I will consider it compensation for the points that were deducted from your house."

James scrubbed at his face, shuddering, trying to get Merlin's beard oil off. "Yeah, sure, what do you have in mind?"

"I need you to convince Mr. Deedle and a third person of your choosing to help me retrieve some items for my office. They are essential to my work, but I require some assistance in acquiring them. You might say they have been in storage for quite some time."

"Like a thousand years or so?" James replied, feeling piqued. "I didn't know they had rental lockers for that long. How do you know your stuff's still there?"

"That is my concern, Mr. Potter, not yours. May I assume your help?"

"Doesn't sound like you need us," James muttered. "Why don't you get some of the other teachers to help you?"

"Because I am a cautious man," Merlin answered, smiling slightly. "I'd prefer to keep my inventory somewhat private, as there are those who might question the origins of some of my tools. This is why I have specifically chosen you and Mr. Deedle. You two have already proven, perhaps to a fault, that you know how to manage secrets."

"So I get Gryffindor's ten points back if we help you get your stuff? Sounds fair enough. I'm guessing that the deal only counts if we don't tell anyone though, right?" James said, looking up at the big man.

Merlin nodded. "Thus, you should choose your third helper carefully. We leave tomorrow afternoon. Meet me at the entrance to the old rotunda, and be prepared to walk."

Merlin turned to leave, his great robe swaying about him.

"Uh, Headmaster?" James called, keeping his voice low so as not to alert the Gremlins in the landing below. Merlin stopped and half turned back to James, one eyebrow raised. James asked, "Any sign of the Borley?"

Merlin shook his head. "But fear not, Mr. Potter. I have every reason to believe yours is the last one. It will show itself in due course. Perhaps next time, you will be better equipped to handle it."

A moment later, the big man had gone, somehow melting into the shadows of the corridor, his footfalls making no noise whatsoever. There was definitely something creepy about the ancient wizard. He seemed to carry a sense of wildness and night air with him, even inside the halls of the school. Obviously, Merlin had secret ways of knowing what was going on in the halls. After all, he'd known exactly where to find James and what he was up to. It occurred to James that it'd probably be a challenge to sneak past Merlin even with the Invisibility Cloak on.

Shortly, the Gremlins tiptoed up the staircase again. Rose was the last up, and she was covering her mouth to stifle a giggle.

As they threaded their way back to the Gryffindor common room, Petra asked, "Did you see anyone, James?"

James glanced at her, considering. After a moment, he shook his head. "No one worth mentioning."

It was the closest thing to the truth he could think of.

The next morning, as James was tramping down the stairway to breakfast, he was stopped by a noisy crowd gathered around the landing. Filch stood in the middle of it, staring up at the Heracles window. His cheeks were livid red and his eyebrows worked angrily. James could see the window clearly from his vantage point halfway up the staircase. The image of Heracles was gone. In its place was a fairly good representation of Salazar Slytherin. Strangely, he seemed to be grinning giddily and skipping down a winding path. He was arm in arm with a boy with unruly dark hair: Albus. A banner floated over their heads containing the words 'A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN?'. Worse, behind them, lying stricken on the path, was a pale boy with sharp features and white-blonde hair. The caricature of Scorpius had a word balloon coming out of its mouth. It read, 'FORSOOTH SALAZAR! BEHOLD MINE BREAKING HEART!'

"It's a line from a classic wizard love sonnet," Damien said smugly as he crowded in next to James. "One in ten people will probably get it, but it appeals to me somehow."

"You are such a geek, Damien," Sabrina said affectionately.

The sun presided over an unusually warm afternoon as James met Ralph near the great arch of the old rotunda. Beams of golden light made stripes across the marble floor and partway up the remains of the statues of the original founders. Nothing but their feet and parts of their legs remained after all these years. The broken bits were worn smooth from centuries of curious hands.

"She's coming," James said as he trotted to a stop next to his friend. "She just takes forever to get ready. What is it about girls and getting ready?"

Ralph shrugged. "Fiera Hutchins says that girls take longer to get ready because they actually get ready. She says boys just matt their hair down with spit, slap on some cologne, and call it done."

"So what's wrong with that?" James muttered.

Rose approached them from behind. She was looking cool and, James had to admit, much more prepared than he was. "I told you I was right behind you," she admonished.

"What's in the basket?" Ralph asked, nodding at the small satchel slung over her shoulder.

"Let's see," Rose said, cocking her hip. "My wand, some water, a few biscuits, a Bug-repellent Charm, a field knife, a pair of Omnioculars, an extra pair of socks, and some sunglasses." She looked back and forth between Ralph and James. "What? You said we were supposed to come prepared to walk!"

James shook his head. "How can you be so like your mum and your dad at the same time?"

"Just fortunate, I guess," Rose sniffed.

"We're supposed to be prepared to walk?" Ralph asked, furrowing his brow. "Is that anything like hiking?"

James set out across the rotunda floor. "Come on, Merlin said he'd meet us at the entrance, and when he gives directions, he means them."

"I don't even own hiking shoes," Ralph lamented, following.

The three stepped out into the warmth of the afternoon. At one time, centuries ago, the rotunda entrance had been the main entry to Hogwarts castle. Now it was virtually unused. The portico's huge doors were almost always left open, looking out over a long field of weeds and heather, ending at the edge of the Forest.

"Those are creepy," Rose said, looking back into the gloom of the rotunda at the remains of the statues. "They must have been enormous before they were broken. Whatever happened to them?"

"The statues of the founders?" James replied. "They were destroyed. A long time ago. In a battle or something."

"You don't know, do you?" Rose challenged, raising her eyebrows.

James didn't, but he wasn't about to admit it. He made a show of watching for Merlin.

Ralph frowned thoughtfully. "I wonder what ever happened to the pieces. You think they're still here, stored away in a cellar or something?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," Rose agreed. "There's room enough here for them to keep everything. They say the original founders themselves are buried here somewhere, although nobody knows where. All except Salazar Slytherin."

Ralph blinked at her. "Why isn't he buried here?"

"I thought you said you read Hogwarts: A History?"

Ralph turned to James. "Is she always like this? If so, remind me not to ask her any more questions."

"He's not buried here," James answered, "because he had a big row with the other founders and got kicked out of the school."

Ralph grimaced. "I probably don't want to know what that was about, do I?"

"I'm sure you can guess," James replied. "It's a good thing times have changed, eh?"

"Times never change," a deep voice said. James glanced up and saw Merlin climbing the steps from the field below. "But people do. Greetings, my friends. Are we ready to disembark?"

"If that means are we ready to hike," Ralph said tentatively, "I'm not sure I'm prepared to answer that."

Merlin turned on the steps and began to descend again into the grassy weeds at the bottom. James looked at Rose and Ralph, then shrugged and ran down the steps to follow.

"So how are we getting there, Headmaster?" Rose called. "Portkey? Broom? Side-Along Apparition?"

"I thought Mr. Potter had already informed you," Merlin replied without looking back. "We are going to walk."

"The whole way?" Ralph said, tripping over a patch of heather.

Merlin seemed to be enjoying himself. "It'll become easier as we go, Mr. Deedle. In my day—and I admit that that day was quite a long time ago indeed—people walked virtually everywhere. It is good for wizards and witches to move within nature. It reminds us of who we are."

"I know who I am," Ralph grumbled. "I'm a bloke with cruddy shoes and a preference for food that comes in wrappers."

They reached the edge of the Forest and Merlin stepped into it without breaking his stride. There was no path, but Merlin seemed to know where to step. He barely made a footprint or bent a stalk of grass. James paused for a moment at the edge of the woods. Merlin wasn't slowing, and James knew that if he didn't keep up, he would quickly lose the big wizard in the density of the trees. He plunged in after him, trying as well as he could to match Merlin's giant stride.

"Hold up a minute," Rose called, plucking burs from her jeans as she walked. "Not all of us can commune with the oneness of nature and all that."

As they progressed, however, James noticed a strange thing. In some small way, he did seem to be connecting with the woods around him. It was as if the Forest blended with Merlin as he moved, opening for him and closing up again once he was past. If James, Ralph, and Rose kept close enough, they travelled in the wake of that opening. Briars bent away from them, streams sprouted smooth, dry stepping stones, and even the grass and brush laid down flat, softening the ground for their feet. No branches snagged them despite the fact that the woods were exceedingly dense. Even the reddening sunlight seemed to wend its way through the thick treetops, laying down a trail of light for them.

"Hey, James," Ralph said quietly, "how far do you think we've gone?"

"We've only been at it for half an hour or so," James replied, glancing up at the sun. "We can't have gone much further than Hogsmeade, depending on what direction we're heading in. It's hard to tell, isn't it?"

Ralph nodded. "Yeah, it is. I swear it feels like we've been walking only a few minutes and about a week at the same time."

"Your mind is playing tricks on you," Rose said. "It happens on long trips. The monotony gets to you. We're probably hardly out of sight of the castle. If only the trees would thin out a bit."

As Rose spoke, Merlin stepped into a blaze of orange light. James squinted as he followed, then gasped, catching himself and throwing out his hands to stop Ralph and Rose. They bumped him from behind.

"Hey," Rose replied, dropping her satchel, "why are we stopping—"

Her voice trailed away as she looked up. A blindingly beautiful sunset filled the view before them, blazing with oranges and pinks and deep lavenders, but that was only half of it. Fifteen feet in front of James' feet, the stony ground fell away, plunging dizzyingly to a rocky beach pounded with surf. Mist

roared up on the wind, wetting their faces and beading on their eyelashes.

"Is that the ocean?" Rose asked breathlessly. "That's impossible!"

A voice called indistinctly. James tore his eyes from the sight below him and saw Merlin some distance away. He was standing on a narrow path that threaded along the crags of the cliff. He waved for them to follow. After a few awed moments, they did.

The roar of the ocean and the whipping wind filled their ears as they skirted the cliff, catching up with Merlin. While they were still some distance behind him, Rose slipped in next to James.

Keeping her voice low, she said, "James, why did you ask me to come along on this trip?"

"That's easy," James replied, treading as quickly as he could on the uneven path along the cliff. "I had to pick someone who could keep a secret. Besides, I knew you had some doubts about Merlin. I wanted you to see him up close and personal."

"I have to tell you that so far I'm not feeling much better about him," Rose confided. "Somehow, he just walked us about a hundred kilometers in a half hour. But still, I'm just wondering, James: why didn't you ask Albus to come?"

James glanced over his shoulder at Rose. "I don't know. You were the first person I thought of."

"I just think it's curious, that's all."

Ralph had caught up to them. "Why'd you ask me to come?" he asked, panting a little.

"Merlin asked for you specifically, Ralph. He said he knew you and me were good at keeping secrets."

Rose frowned. "I want to know who he's keeping secrets from."

"Shh," James hissed as they neared Merlin.

He had stopped at the crown of a steep, rocky promontory. As the three climbed to meet him, they realized they were at the point of a narrow peninsula. Only when they joined Merlin at the top did they see that the peninsula extended ahead of them, making a natural bridge out over the crashing surf far below. The peninsula was barely as wide as the path, with a sheer drop on either side. At the far end, the stony bridge connected to an enormous craggy monolith, nearly the same size and shape as a Hogwarts turret. The top seemed roughly flat and was covered with blowing grass.

"We're not going out on that," Ralph stated flatly. "I mean, we're not, right? That would be totally mad."

Even as he finished speaking, Merlin stepped out onto the rocky spine. "Follow closely, my friends. It is less dangerous than it looks, but it is not harmless. I will catch you if you fall, but let us work to

avoid that necessity."

Fortunately, James wasn't particularly afraid of heights. Keeping his eyes on the large man striding easily along the narrow path, James stepped forward to follow.

"Oh bugger," Ralph muttered from behind, his voice almost lost in the whipping, salty wind.

It was actually quite exhilarating, in a giddy, terrifying sort of way. The wind shifted restlessly, tugging at James' sleeves and pant legs. He knew he shouldn't look down, and yet he couldn't help studying the path, watching for the firmest footing. Occasionally, James saw hints of stonework and large bricks embedded in the path as if it had been shored up in the distant past, perhaps repeatedly. Dry weeds grew sparsely in the rocks, hissing in the incessant, shifting wind. On either side, the surf pounded and boomed against the rocks far below.

"This is insane," Ralph called in a high, wavering voice. "What do we do if we fall off the side? Call out, 'Oh Headmaster, I'm plummeting on the right side, a little help when you get a mo'?'"

James thought about how Merlin had found him in the halls the previous night, and how he'd known exactly what they were up to. "I think he has ways of knowing what's going on. Don't worry about it, Ralph."

Rose, directly behind James, said, "That's fabulously reassuring."

Finally, the path began to widen. The cliffs were obscured as they walked through a sort of gate made by a tumble of worn boulders and scree. James finally allowed himself to look around as he stepped into the clearing atop the monstrous monolith. It was indeed covered in long grass and brush, but it wasn't entirely flat. Instead, it was vaguely funnel-shaped, dipping to a hidden depression in the middle. Merlin was standing in a narrow path that threaded down into the center.

"Exhilarating," he called heartily. He looked grimly happy, his cloak whipping freely about his legs and his beard streaming in the wind.

"Actually," James answered, "yeah, it was!"

Rose and Ralph caught up and gathered near the wizard.

"Are we there yet?" Ralph asked, raking his hair out of his eyes with his fingers.

Merlin turned and looked into the middle of the plateau, which dipped out of sight. "We are. Watch your step from this point. It gets a bit tricky."

"Oh, good," Ralph muttered helplessly.

"Buck up, Ralph," Rose said, tying her hair back with a short length of ribbon. "This is the best adventure you'll never be able to tell anyone about."

"I don't know why everyone seems to think I like adventures. I never even read adventure stories."

"Stay close," Merlin said again as he began to descend the path.

As the four worked their way down the funnel-shaped plateau, the dry grass began to give way. James stopped for a moment as the true nature of the monolith became apparent. The center grew steeper and steeper, dropping deep into a natural pit fifty feet across. The path transitioned to huge stone steps, and then to a narrow stairway carved around the inside of the pit. The stairs were obviously ancient, rounded and slick with moss. The heart of the pit was filled with ocean water, roiling and heaving in and out of a hundred fissures worn through the stone. The boom of the waves was nearly deafening.

Finally, just above the level of the surf, the stairway met a large cave. Merlin led the three into the dimness. He stopped and tapped his staff on the rocky floor, lighting it. Purplish light filled the space, making hard shadows in every crag and crack.

"Nice hiding place," James said, whistling.

"It sure is," Rose agreed, "considering it's underwater half the day. We're in the middle of low tide right now."

"Is that where you have your stuff hidden?" Ralph asked, pointing toward a large door-shaped hole in the rear of the cave wall. "There's writing over the door, but I can't read it."

Rose peered at it, stepping closer. "It's Welsh, isn't it?"

"It's an old form of what you'd call Welsh, I suppose," Merlin said, approaching the door. "Roughly translated, it reads, 'This is the cache of Merlinus Ambrosius; do not enter on pain of death.'"

Ralph squinted at the barely legible letters. "So much for secret riddles and magical passwords."

"I do not believe in toying with the lives of treasure seekers," Merlin replied. "The mention of my name was enough to repel most who came this far. Those that ventured further deserved fair warning."

"Isn't there some sort of key or something?" Rose asked.

"No, Miss Weasley. The trick is not to get in. In fact, quite the reverse. Which is why you and Mr. Deedle will wait out here."

Ralph brightened. "That's the first good news I've heard since we started this trip. But why?"

"Your wand is a fragment of my staff," Merlin smiled grimly. "Thus, it is the only other magical instrument on the earth that can reverse the doorway."

Ralph nodded, waving his hand. "Good enough for me. Just tell me what to do when the time comes. Happy pot-holing."

Rose asked, "What about me?"

Merlin produced something from the depths of his robes and handed it to her. It was a small mirror with an ornate golden frame. "Do you know how to make an Occido Beam?"

James saw Rose struggle not to roll her eyes. "I know how to reflect the sun with a mirror, yes."

Merlin nodded and looked at James. "Follow me, Mr. Potter, and stay close."

With that, he turned and stepped through the doorway. His staff lit the interior of the chamber with its purple glow. James glanced at Ralph and Rose, shrugged, and followed Merlin into the cavern.

Immediately, his footsteps crunched unpleasantly.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed. "Bones!"

The floor was covered thickly with tiny skeletons. The remains of birds, fish and rodents were piled several inches deep. Merlin didn't pay them any attention.

"An unfortunate cost," he said, moving deeper into the cavern. "The one-way stone is rather unforgiving. My rune-warnings are rather less effective now than they were a few centuries ago."

"You made warnings for the birds and rats?" James asked.

Merlin looked back at him. "Of course, Mr. Potter. The creatures do not enter to thieve, but merely for shelter and food. I embedded a Hex of Dread in the stone of this place. It told their small minds that there was no good thing to be found here, and to stay away. I underestimated the longevity of those hexes however. I am not happy to be responsible for the loss of these creatures. I will repay the earth for their sacrifice."

"What do you mean by 'one-way stone'?" James asked, but as he turned back toward the doorway, he saw for himself. The entry was gone, replaced by rough, seamless rock. By all appearances, James and Merlin were trapped inside a sealed cave. He shuddered and hugged himself, glancing around the dark, craggy space. Something caught his eye.

"Er," he said, trying to keep his voice calm, "that's not the bones of a bird or a rat, is it?"

Merlin followed James' gaze and saw the human skeleton leaning against a dark alcove. The skeleton was draped with the remains of rough armor. A rusted sword lay near the skeleton's hand.

"I wouldn't get too close, Mr. Potter," Merlin warned mildly as James took a step nearer the skeleton, morbidly fascinated.

"Wow," James breathed, "there are still rings on the fingers. And hair on the skull. Gah, there's the remains of a mustache! Who do you think—"

The skeleton suddenly lunged forward, throwing up its arms and waving the remains of the decrepit sword. James leapt backwards, tumbling into Merlin.

"Avaunt!" the skeleton cried, waving its arms and swiveling its head. "Reveal yourself lest I run you through for sport!"

"It's all right, James," Merlin said wryly, helping James get his feet under him. "Just stay back from it." Then, to the skeleton, he said, "You cannot see us because you have no eyes, Farrigan."

"Merlinus!" the skeleton cried. "Where are you, you devil's son? How dare you trap me?"

"How dare you breach my boundary and attempt to steal my cache, my old friend?"

"Friend, pah!" the skeleton spat. Its jawbone squeaked as it spoke. "You were quit of the world. Dead! What good was it to you?"

"You hoped I was dead, but you knew otherwise. My cache was bequeathed to no one but me, either way. Austramaddux made you well aware of that."

"Austramaddux is a mongrel cur," the skeleton of Farrigan growled. "I'll put his head on my wall for this trickery. And what mean you that I have no eyes? It is merely dark. Light your staff if you are Merlinus, curse you."

Merlin looked at James, his eyes hard. "He will be released from his bond to this world when we leave. It was part of the curse of anyone who dared breach this place that they should remain until my return. Now that that time is come, the curse will end. Can you bear to wait with him? He is quite harmless as long as you keep your distance."

James looked at the skeleton. It lolled against the wall, working to pull its leg bones together and make them work. It muttered squeakily to itself. James swallowed.

"Yeah, I guess. How long will you be?"

"Mere minutes," Merlin replied, then he raised his voice. "Miss Weasley, can you hear me?"

Rose's voice came through the invisible entrance clearly. "I'm right here. I'm looking right at you through the door. What's going on in there?"

"Nothing consequential. Can you direct the Occido Beam now? The waning sunlight should be finding its way through a large crack to the left of the cave mouth."

James heard Rose's footsteps as she walked away. A moment later, a narrow beam of sunlight speared the dusty air of the cavern, penetrating the one-way stone of the doorway.

"Very good, Miss Weasley," Merlin said. "Up just a bit, please."

The beam of sunlight pierced the depths of the cave. It bobbed and roamed as Merlin directed Rose, carefully aligning the beam. Finally, it lit upon a shiny burnished symbol embedded in a far distant wall. It flared brightly and suddenly, amazingly, a long golden cord dropped out of the beam of sunlight.

"Thank you, Miss Weasley," Merlin called, reaching to collect the end of the cord. "You have done exceptionally well. Whatever you or Mr. Deedle do from this point on, under no circumstances should you enter the cavern, regardless of what you hear."

James felt a chill as Merlin turned to him.

"Your duty is very simple, Mr. Potter, but absolutely essential. You must hold the end of this cord."

James took the cord in his hands as Merlin handed it to him. It was thin, finely woven from bright golden threads. "All I have to do is hold it?"

Merlin nodded, maintaining eye contact with James. "But be sure, James Potter, as long as you hold this cord, you hold my life in your hands. You cannot let go for any reason until I return. Do you understand?"

James frowned, puzzled. He nodded. Without another word, Merlin turned and walked into the dimmer recesses of the cave, holding his staff ahead of him. The cave was apparently rather deeper than James had initially believed. As the wizard strode slowly away, his staff illuminated a much larger cavern connected to the one James stood in. The floor was very dark, nearly black. Strangely, Merlin was walking on the golden cord, placing each foot carefully on its length. The cord stretched into the depths of the cavern, disappearing into darkness. With a start, James saw that the floor of the larger cavern was not simply dark, as he had initially thought. It wasn't there at all. Merlin was walking on the cord alone, suspended over an apparently bottomless abyss.

There was a dry chuffing sound and James glanced over at the skeleton. It appeared to be laughing.

"Off to get his treasures, is he?" it said. "Left you in the lurch, methinks. Favor me with your name, oh demon."

"I'm not a demon," James said. "My name is James."

"Ah, a great name, that is. Tell me, Master James, if you are not a servant demon, why do you hold the son of the devil's cord?"

James shook his head. He knew he shouldn't talk to the pathetic Farrigan. It chuffed laughter again, wearily, and dropped its sword. The rusted blade broke off the hilt and the skeleton drew a great sigh, crackling its ribs.

"I have divined my state now," Farrigan said. "Austramaddux was right about the trap. I have been here an age, have not I? I am long dead, bound to this earth only by the curse of that abomination. And

for what? I came not to thieve, but to destroy. Can you understand that, oh James, who holds the cord of the very man? I came to end it once and for all. But I have failed, and now it is begun. It is a good thing I am dead after all, and shall not see of it, yes?" The skeleton chuckled.

James' curiosity got the better of him. "What is it? What is begun?"

"Say not that you be such a fool as to be blind to Merlinus' skullduggery," the skeleton replied, turning its head toward the sound of James' voice. "You, who even now assist him in his aims. Tell me not that you have not heard of the Curse, my young friend."

"I don't know what you're talking about," James answered. "Merlin's not who you think he is. I don't know what he was like in your time, but he's different now. He's good."

The skeleton threw itself forward, cackling and beating its bony thighs with its hands. Finger joints broke away and pattered amongst the animal bones. "If you believe that, then perhaps your world deserves what is to be dealt it."

"What is it?" James asked, feeling simultaneously fearful and annoyed.

The skeleton of Farrigan stopped cackling. It twisted its head toward James again, its blank eyes penetrating. "How can you not know that the Gate is rent open? Merlinus has torn the curtain. His return to the world of men is a rift, connecting the realms. Things have come through, and are even now loose among men."

"The Borleys," James said to himself, considering.

The skeleton nodded. "But that is not all. It is coming. The Gatekeeper. The Sentinel of Worlds! Merlinus is its Ambassador. Fool! Even now, you hold the cord in your hands! Release it! Perhaps the Gate may still be shut! Release the cord and rid the world of the Curse, for it is nearly complete! Believe not the lies! Release it and send him to his deserved doom!"

"No," James said, gripping the cord tightly, as if his fingers might betray him. He looked out along the length of the cord, but he could no longer see Merlinus. He could feel no weight on the cord. He knew he shouldn't pay any attention to the deranged skeleton. Obviously, Farrigan was an ancient enemy of Merlinus. Probably, he had broken into the cavern to steal the cache, as Merlin alleged, and become trapped by the one-way stone. The skeleton was lying. There was no Curse. And yet…

What if the skeleton was telling the truth? James had been responsible for bringing Merlin back into the world, duped by the horrible Madame Delacroix and her accomplices. He, James, had been consulted about whether or not Merlin should become the new Headmaster of Hogwarts. If there was any truth to what the skeleton said, it would be entirely on James' head. Perhaps it was destiny, then, that had placed the cord in his hands, the cord that could cut Merlin off again, undoing all that James had unwittingly done. Perhaps now was his only chance to set things right again.

"I sense your struggle, boy," the skeleton said quietly. "You know what your purpose is, do you not?

Do it. How hard can it be? It is no effort at all. Simply let go. Your friends await you outside, ready to release you from this place. They need not know what became of the wizard. Tell them he simply fell and is no more. Only you will know what you have saved your world from. Do it now. Do it while you still can."

James looked again. He could see Merlin now. He was returning along the length of the cord, a small box in one hand, his staff held aloft in the other. The cord was perfectly motionless as the big man placed his footsteps on it. James could still feel not the slightest tension on the cord. He squeezed it in his hands, thinking hard. Could he do it? Should he? Would he ever have such a chance again?

"Do it, boy!" the skeleton of Farrigan whispered harshly, leaning forward. "Close your eyes, do not watch, and let go!"

The cord was slick with sweat in James' hand. He almost did it. His fingers twitched. And then he remembered something Merlin had said the year before, shortly after he'd come back into the world. You have rather a talent for looking beyond the flat of the mirror, James Potter, he'd told him. That had been a compliment, James assumed, and it meant that he was not easily fooled. Of course, Madame Delacroix had fooled him, but that had required the use of a very carefully hexed voodoo doll. Merlin had implied that words alone were not enough to dupe James.

Thinking that, James turned to the skeleton one last time. "How do I know you are telling me the truth?"

The skeleton seemed to sputter. "You know by the evidence of your own soul! You sense the rightness of my allegations! Now drop the cord! End it!"

James narrowed his eyes. "You know, I don't think I will. I don't know what things were like in your time, but in my world, we don't kill people just because somebody says they're troublesome."

"Then your world deserves its own doom," the skeleton replied, rattling back against the cavern wall. "I wash my hands of you. The Doombringer is come."

James decided it was best not to argue with the skeleton. Now that he'd made up his mind, he knew there was no point in it. He looked out along the cord and saw that Merlin was nearly back. His face was still grim, but there was a twinkle in his dark eyes.

"Our task is complete, Mr. Potter," he said as he stepped onto the stone of the cave floor. "You may release the cord. We will require it no longer."

James let the cord drop to the floor. It slithered away and dropped silently into the dark abyss. Sighing, James glanced over at the skeleton, but it didn't move.

"I'd expect to hear no more from him," Merlin said quietly. "He has done what he remained to do."

"What's that mean?" James said, turning to the wizard. "Why did I have to hold that cord?"

"Trust, Mr. Potter," Merlin replied, smiling a little sorrowfully. "It is a scarce commodity among those whose hearts are bent on evil. This is why trust was the final test before my cache."

"You knew he would be here?" James nodded toward the skeleton.

"Him, or someone like him. His duty was to challenge your trust. After all, it isn't really trust at all if there isn't a struggle."

James looked up at Merlin's face. "I almost let go," he said quietly. "All I had to do was hold the cord, and I almost didn't do it."

Merlin nodded gravely. "Doing what is right is nearly always simple, Mr. Potter. But it is never easy."

There didn't seem to be anything more to say. James and Merlin walked back to the rough stone wall that bore the hidden door.

"Mr. Deedle," Merlin called, "by your leave, we shall come out now."

James heard Ralph's voice clearly through the apparently impenetrable stone as if he was only a few feet away. "Er, all right then. What do I do?"

"Point your wand at the doorway and say 'Braut Tir'."

There was a pause. James heard Ralph whisper, "What's that? I missed the accent!"

"Just do it, Ralph," Rose rasped impatiently, "they're standing right there. What's the worst that can happen?"

Ralph said the incantation. There was a slight pop and the doorway appeared. The light of the sunset flooded the cave. James squinted out at Ralph and Rose as Merlin extinguished his staff.

"What'd I do?" Ralph exclaimed, stumbling backwards a step. "I sealed them in! The entrance disappeared!" Even Rose's eyes had widened in fear.

"What's wrong with you two?" James asked, stepping through the doorway with Merlin right behind him.

Ralph's eyes widened even further. "Whoa," he said, awed. "You just, like, walked right through a stone wall. You're not, er, dead, are you?"

"They're fine, you prat," Rose grinned, smacking Ralph on the shoulder.

"One-way stone," James shrugged, glancing back at the now solid wall of the cave. The door was completely invisible. "Is it closed forever?"

Merlin nodded. "I require it no more. Let us return. The daylight will be gone soon and the tide rises even as we speak.

James looked and saw that the waves were slopping over the lip of the cavern mouth. Each wave pushed more water onto the rough floor. Merlin still carried the small box under his arm as he turned to lead them up the narrow, curving stairway.

"So that's it?" Ralph called up from the rear. "You have all your stuff in that little box?"

"Are you surprised, Mr. Deedle?" Merlin replied. "Would you prefer to heft a pile of trunks?"

Ralph chuckled humorlessly. "You'd be on your own if that was the case. I can barely manage to drag myself out of here."

The return trip across the peninsula bridge was rather easier than it had been on their first crossing. The cliffs of the shoreline were a welcome sight and the wind was less than it had been an hour ago. Merlin was the last to cross. When he joined James, Rose, and Ralph on the crown of the promontory overlooking the peninsula, he turned to look back. Almost casually, he thrust his staff out over the bridge.

"Discordium," he said quietly. There was no flash of light or obvious magical blast of power, and yet the middle of the bridge shuddered visibly. As if in slow motion, the spine of rock disintegrated and crumbled massively into the ocean below, sending up enormous, crashing geysers of water.

"Well, that's that then, isn't it?" Rose said, impressed.

Merlin smiled down at her. Finally, just as the sun touched its golden reflection on the ocean horizon, they turned to depart.

As they made their way back, following in Merlin's enchanted path, Rose drew close to James again.

"Ralph and I heard you talking in there," she said quietly. "But it didn't sound like you were talking to Merlin. Was there something in there we couldn't see from the doorway?"

James didn't answer right away. For some reason, he felt reticent to tell Rose and Ralph about the skeleton of Farrigan. He glanced at Rose. "That was me," he said, shrugging. "I was just… talking to myself. It was creepy in there while Merlin went for the box."

Rose tightened her lips and looked closely at James as she walked. He knew she knew he was lying. He looked away and trotted closer to Merlin.

"Headmaster," he said after a while, "what are the Borleys?"

Merlin was walking directly in front of James, his long stride cruising straight through the Forest like a knife. The last shreds of dusk on his robes gave him a vague, ghostly cast.

"As I explained to you on the train, Mr. Potter, the Borleys are shadow creatures."

"Yeah, I remember, but where do they come from?"

Merlin's normally deep voice dropped a bit lower. "Your companion in the cave was talkative, wasn't he?"

James followed Merlin closely. He wished he could see the wizard's face. They moved through the darkening woods swiftly, making very little noise. The wind shifted capriciously in the trees, rustling them, almost as if to cover Merlin's voice.

James went on, "He said that the Borleys came with you from between the worlds when you returned."

Merlin's voice was still low and rumbling. "There is a grain of truth in all fictions, Mr. Potter. Perhaps you know what barnacles are? Disgusting creatures that accumulate on the hulls of ships after a long sea journey. They weigh down the ship and must eventually be removed and destroyed. You may think of the Borleys as the magical equivalent."

"So they did come back with you?"

"This is so. I have been hard at work hunting them since my return. Most remained near me and were easy to capture. Two followed Mr. Deedle and Mr. Walker. Those I was able to track and capture before either boy became aware of them. Yours, Mr. Potter, was rather wilier. I believe it is the last of them."

James had been curious about something ever since that day on the train. "How do you catch them if you can't use magic on them?"

"Old elements, James Potter," Merlin replied, and his voice had that strange, hypnotic quality that James had last heard when the wizard was talking a confession out of Denniston Dolohov, Ralph's father, last spring. The Forest was becoming quite dark, and James wished again that he could see Merlin's face. He had the creepy sensation that Merlin was talking to him without using an audible voice. Merlin went on, "Old elements that few in this age even know of, much less understand. I have a very curious bag, a Darkbag, which has nothing in it. When I say that it contains nothing, Mr. Potter, I do not mean that it is merely empty. The bag is full, packed even, with the last remaining relic of pure darkness, left over from the dawn of time. It is into this bag that the Borleys go, for there is only one thing that a creature of shadow needs to exist in, and that is light."

"Does it kill them?" James asked quietly.

"Nothing can kill a Shade, Mr. Potter. They can only be contained. They remain locked in the Darkbag, starved for magic, desperate for escape, but utterly diminished with no light to define them. The Ministry of Magic has utilized a similar, albeit crude, method for containing Dementors ever since they were deemed untrustworthy as guards of Azkaban. They are sealed in the cellars of their

old ward, Azkaban itself, captive in chambers rendered magically lightless. There, their powers are greatly diminished, though not decimated. They howl, Mr. Potter. I am told it is a dreadful sound, and I believe it."

James shivered. After a minute, he asked, "So what happens if the Darkbag gets torn open?"

For the first time, Merlin turned. James saw one eye of the wizard looking back at him over his shoulder. Still, he didn't break his stride. "The Borleys would escape as a swarm, of course, Mr. Potter. Starved for magic, they would attack the first source of magic they found and devour it."

"D-devour it?" James said. "But you said they were harmless. Like barnacles."

"I said that one Borley, in its entry state, was mostly harmless. Many Borleys, some in advanced states, and all desperate from their imprisonment, would be anything but harmless. In the event of the Darkbag's destruction, the barnacles would become piranhas. But this is impossible, Mr. Potter. I am the keeper of the Darkbag, and that means it is utterly safe."

James sighed. "Is that the famous Merlin bluster you told me about last year?"

Merlin finally stopped. He turned and squatted, his eyes level with James. He smiled and his eyes twinkled in the rising moonlight. "No, Mr. Potter," he said in his normal voice. "That is the famous Merlin oath you have not yet learned of. You may count on it."

"Finally," Ralph said as he and Rose caught up to them. "A break. Rose, you still have those biscuits? How about a sharesy?"

When they finally reached the castle, Merlin led them straight through the halls and up the spiral staircase to his office. Apart from the enormous desk and the dozens of portraits that lined the walls of the Headmaster's office, the room was unnaturally empty. James glanced around and saw the portraits of Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore, his brother's two namesakes. Both portrait frames were, for the moment, unoccupied.

"I wanted to thank you three for your assistance this afternoon," Merlin said, and he sounded almost hearty now that they had returned. "Thus, I thought you might like to see my cache opened."

Rose widened her eyes with interest. "You're going to show us what's in it?"

"Not precisely, Miss Weasley, although you will certainly see its contents in time. No, I mean that perhaps you might like to see it opened. It is, if I do say so myself, rather a good bit."

James smiled quizzically. "Well, sure. If you say so. Let's have a look."

Merlin seemed pleased. He carefully bent and set the small wooden box on the floor. There was a clasp on the front, holding the lid shut. Merlin lifted the latch and stood back.

Slowly, the lid began to rise. It seemed to lift like a drawer out of the box, sliding upwards much further than the depth of the box should have allowed. There was another drawer embedded in the front of the first drawer. James moved around the box and saw that there were, in fact, drawers on all four sides of the main drawer. The vertical drawer reached man's height and stopped with a shudder. With a soft click, the drawers on all four sides began to roll out. The sides of each new drawer bore yet more drawers. Slowly, they unrolled, each surface revealing more and more compartments. It was beautiful to watch, and yet it boggled the mind. James' eyes seemed to resist what they were seeing. They watered a bit as the box expanded, filling the center of the room. Finally, after about a minute, the drawers stopped. James, Rose, and Ralph walked around the mass of drawers, doors, and complicated locks and hinges.

"That was definitely a good bit," James said, awed.

"Much better than a pile of trunks," Rose agreed.

"Wonderful," Ralph sighed. "Mysteries and enigmas galore." He looked pleadingly at James. "Can we go eat now?"

James grinned. The three students headed toward the door leading out of the Headmaster's office. James was the last to go through, but just as he was leaving, Merlin called his name. James stopped and turned as Ralph and Rose started down the spiral staircase.

"I have returned your subtracted ten points, Mr. Potter, and added ten as well," Merlin said. "You did very well in the cavern. You will remember, of course, that secrecy is essential."

"Sure," James replied. "Not a word to anyone."

Merlin nodded, meeting James at the door. "Of course," he said, lowering his voice, "I do not know precisely what Lord Farrigan said to you while I retrieved the box, but I expect his words would also not bear repeating to anyone within these halls. That includes Mr. Deedle and Miss Weasley. As you know, the dead can be very… persuasive. I'd hate to see any conspiracies take root."

James looked up at the Headmaster. The big man was like a giant next to him. James nodded slowly. Merlin seemed satisfied.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," he said. "Do enjoy your dinner. You've earned it."

A moment later, James found himself standing next to the closed door of the Headmaster's office. He looked at it thoughtfully, his brow slightly furrowed.

"Come on, James!" Rose called up. "The gargoyle says it's cherry posset for dessert tonight! I never get sweets like that at home!"

James shook his head slightly. If Merlin didn't want James to tell Rose and Ralph what the skeleton had said, then there was surely a good reason. But Merlin had only said he shouldn't tell anyone

within the halls of Hogwarts. If it came to it, there was technically no reason James couldn't tell his parents, and they could tell whomever they wished, couldn't they? Satisfied with that, James turned and climbed down the spiral staircase to join his friends.

5. Albus and the Broom

James met Ralph at the base of the steps on Monday morning. The halls were already filled with the clamor and bustle of the start of school, and even though James knew he'd probably be missing the freedoms of summer by the end of his first week, for the moment he was still looking forward to classes.

"Got my schedule all set," Ralph proclaimed happily as they entered the Great Hall for breakfast. "Got Defence Against the Dark Arts with that Debellows bloke first thing this morning."

"Check that," James said. "I'm there too. Strange that he didn't require a book. He must just be so smart about the whole thing that he doesn't need one. This should be excellent."

"Debellows rules," Graham said as James and Ralph plunked down at the table. "You know he once took on two vampires at once with only a Beater bat and a Muggle pencil."

"A pencil?" Ralph furrowed his brow.

"To stab them with, of course. It was the closest thing he had to a wooden stake."

Ralph screwed up his face, thinking. "That must have been one bloody sharp pencil."

Rose had already finished her breakfast, having arrived earlier. "I hear that this is going to be a very practical Defence Against the Dark Arts class, even for first-years. Apparently, Debellows prefers a hands-on approach."

"Well, just look at the fellow," Noah said, turning to gaze at the man still finishing his breakfast at the teachers' table. "He looks like he's ready to pounce even when he's sitting still."

Sabrina leaned over the table and said in a stage-whisper, "I think Noah has a bit of a man-crush on him."

"Oh shut up," Noah replied. "You didn't grow up collecting Debellows Harrier action cards. I just can't believe he's going to teach us how to battle the Dark Arts. I hope he shows us how to do the Perseuspinch maneuver."

"I had an action figure that did that," Graham nodded. "I tried to use it on my mum, once. Got me in no end of Barney."

"I have to wait until Wednesday for my first class with him," Rose complained. "Tell me how it goes tonight, won't you?"

James nodded, his mouth full of toast. Across the room, James could see Albus sitting in the middle of the Slytherin table, smiling and laughing with his new friends. Strangely enough, most of those around him were older students. Tabitha Corsica and Philia Goyle smiled and nodded as Albus spoke.

"Come on," Ralph said, pulling James' collar. "Let's get to class a little early. I want to see what this Debellows is all about."

"Hang on," James said, collecting his bag. He climbed off his bench and skirted the edge of the hall, heading around toward the Slytherin table.

"Hey, Al," he called.

Albus looked up, following the sound of James' voice. "Hi, James! Didn't see you all weekend. What's up?"

"Can you spare a minute to walk with your brother to first class? I want to hear about your adventures in your new house."

"That's sweet," Tabitha said warmly. "Go ahead, Albus. We'll chat again at lunch and make arrangements for Wednesday."

"Excellent!" Albus nodded happily. "All right, come on, big brother. I've got Herbology with Neville first thing."

As they broke away from the Slytherin table, Albus was positively bursting with excitement. "I got my ring key already, see? Spent the whole weekend getting the grand tour with the Fang and Talons. Did you know the Slytherin rooms have their own casting range? We can practice almost any spells and curses we want on these enchanted dummies. If you get a curse right, the dummy drops on the floor and does this hilarious imitation of the effect. Not that I'm any good at the wandwork yet, but Tabby says I shouldn't rush it."

James nearly choked. "'Tabby'?"

"Yeah," Albus nodded. "Tabitha Corsica. She's the unofficial head of Fang and Talons. I mean, nobody is really an official anything in the club. It's really just a joke with the Slytherins."

James looked back at Ralph, his eyebrows raised.

"Tabitha tried to get me in last year, before the debate. It's kind of a secret society, although there's

not much secret about it if you're a Slytherin."

"Tabby says it's fine for me to talk to you about it, James," Albus assured. "But I'd keep it hush-hush if I was you. I mean, we don't want just anybody to know about it. What fun would that be?"

"So what's going on with Tabitha this Wednesday?" James asked.

"What?"

"This Wednesday," James said, stopping as they reached the archway leading outside to the greenhouses. "Tabitha said she'd make arrangements with you about something."

"Oh, that," Albus said, glancing out at the glass buildings twinkling in the morning sunlight. "That's just for Quidditch try-outs. She says she'd love to see me get on the team."

James smiled uncomfortably. "But you don't have a broom or anything. Trust me, those house brooms are useless. I couldn't even fly in a straight line until I got my Thunderstreak."

"That's not going to be a problem," Albus said, shouldering his pack and grinning. "Tabby says she'll let me use her broom for the try-out."

James' mouth dropped open, but Albus turned away before he could say anything. "Got to be off, big brother," he called over his shoulder. "Can't be late to first class!" He strode out into the sunlight, joining a few other first-year Slytherins who'd been skulking nearby. James turned to Ralph, his mouth still hanging open.

"First I heard of it," Ralph said, raising his hands, palm out. "I'm not part of 'Tabby's' crew, you know."

"But that broom…," James sputtered, "it's… it's evil!"

"Come on," Ralph said. "Let it go for now. Class starts in five minutes."

As James turned reluctantly to follow Ralph, he passed Scorpius on his way out to the greenhouses. Scorpius smirked at James and bumped him with his shoulder. James almost said something, but a nearby Slytherin beat him to it.

"Forsooth, mine breaking heart, Malfoy!" the boy called, clutching his chest. There was a chorus of laughter. Scorpius ignored them.

"Why isn't Debellows having class in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom?" Ralph asked, studying his schedule as they threaded through the crowded corridors. "This is taking us all the way to the other side of the castle."

James shrugged, distracted. "Couldn't guess."

They reached the designated room and filed in with the rest of the second-years. The classroom was huge with a very high ceiling and high windows along one wall. There were no chairs or desks. Instead, there were padded mats on the floors, old-fashioned dumbbells arranged in a long rack, and an assortment of clockwork dummies and complicated apparatuses covered with pads and pommels.

Morgan Patonia, the Hufflepuff, walked in and stopped, looking around the space. "Hmph. Welcome to the Hogwarts gymnasium," she said in a bewildered voice. "I didn't even know we had one of these."

The class shuffled nervously around the space, not quite sure what to do with themselves. Kevin Murdock, the Slytherin with whom James had had Technomancy the previous year, grabbed a couple of the dumbbells and hefted them, showing off for a pair of Ravenclaw girls who rolled their eyes.

"Greetings, class!" a voice boomed heartily. James turned to see Professor Debellows striding into the room from a rear door. He was dressed in a short tunic and sandals and had a towel slung around his neck. "As you know, I am your new teacher for Defence Against the Dark Arts, Kendrick Debellows. I hate being called Professor anything, so feel free to call me by my first name. We'll not stand on protocol in this class. I want you all to think of me as your friend and partner. Do have a seat, all of you."

James saw Ralph glance around, as if he expected a row of chairs to have suddenly appeared. The rest of the class was doing the same thing, their faces vaguely confused.

"On the mats!" Debellows laughed. "My word, this is going to be a learning experience for all of us, I daresay. On the mats, students. Anywhere you like. That's the spirit."

James hunkered down with his back against one of the clockwork dummies. As he leaned against it, it emitted a soft click and a whirring sound. The arm of the dummy popped upwards and the hand balled into a huge, padded fist. James boggled up at it, then at Ralph. Ralph looked characteristically worried as he settled uncomfortably on the mat.

"I don't know what kind of classes you are used to in the past, students," Debellows said, clasping his hands behind his back and rocking on his heels. "In fact, I have specifically asked not to be told of the methods of your previous Defence teachers. I have my way of doing things, a way that proved very successful during my years as the leader of the Harriers, and I intend to implement the same methods here. Many of you will be familiar with my exploits, but let me assure you: this is not a lecture class. We will not be discussing my adventures at great length, although they may from time to time prove instructive and illustrative. No, this is going to be a class where we do things. To learn is to perform! And perform you shall. You will most likely end up sore and exhausted. You may return from our classes bruised, sweaty, and bedraggled. But you will become strong! I will do my best to teach you everything I have gleaned from my years of confronting the Dark Arts. Now, I will require a volunteer."

Debellows' gimlet eyes roamed eagerly over the crowd of second-years. A Ravenclaw named Joseph

Torrance raised his hand tentatively.

"Excellent, that's it, don't be shy," Debellow's called heartily. "Come on up here, young man. I don't know your name, but I'll call you Ignatious."

"My name's Joseph," the boy said, joining Debellows at the front of the room.

"Joe, then. Fine, fine. What I want you to do, Joe, is pretend to be a werewolf. I want you to attack me."

"Attack you, sir?" Joseph said a bit uncertainly.

"Yes, yes, as a werewolf. Just lunge at me, go for the throat. Don't be afraid to hurt me."

Joseph swallowed, glancing out at the room, then back at Debellows. Gamely, he crouched, raised his hands with his fingers hooked, and charged, making a fair attempt at a ravenous howl. Just as he jumped, Debellows spun. In a blur of motion, he hooked one leg over the boy, spun him upwards into the air, produced his wand, and shouted an unintelligible command. Joseph froze in midair a moment before he'd have crashed to the mat. His face was still contorted in a comedic growl.

The class had barely had time to gasp before it was over. There was a moment of awed silence, and then a burst of applause. Graham nudged Morgan, nodding excitedly and pointing.

"He's perfectly all right," Debellows called, shaking back the sleeves of his tunic. "He's not even paralyzed, just suspended. Isn't that right, Ignatious?" He patted the boy on his upraised foot.

"It's Joseph, sir," the boy replied, shaking himself and glaring nervously down at the floor.

"Joe, yes, certainly. The point, of course, is not to harm the poor creature, but simply to get its feet off the ground. If it cannot touch the ground, it cannot charge. If it cannot charge… well, the rest is elementary, as you can see. Brace yourself, Joe."

Joseph barely had time to thrust his hands out in front of him before Debellows tapped him with his wand. The boy toppled to the mat.

Debellows looked brightly out over the students. "Any questions?"

Graham shot his hand into the air. "What was that incantation, sir?"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," Debellows chided, ticking his finger at Graham. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Mr., ah, young man. 'Stamina before spells' is my motto. Did you happen to notice the maneuver I used to get the werewolf into the air first? That is the key to the entire affair. The spellwork is merely the icing on the cake. No, in this class, we will apply ourselves to the discipline of physically preparing ourselves for the challenges we may face as defenders of right. Did you know, class, that a fit-enough wizard may overcome even the Imperius Curse if he has enough stamina and mental force of will? It

is true. For too long, the focus of civilian Defence Against the Dark Arts has been quick and dirty spellwork, protection charms, and tricky hexes. Here, I will not make you merely proficient in theory. Here, I will make you into warriors!"

He beamed out at the room, his dark crew cut bristling. After a moment, Kevin Murdock began to clap. The rest of the class joined in halfheartedly.

"I know you probably aren't excited about my approach," Debellows said, raising one hand. "There are those who do not utilize the same methods as I do; those who do not respect the importance of physical prowess, who believe that Expelliarmus spells and Patronuses are more than enough to battle the most evil of foes. In the Harriers, we call those people 'Aurors'." He grinned, and there was a smattering of laughter. Kevin Murdock smirked back at James, nudging a fellow Slytherin. Debellows went on, "But I think you'll find my approach quite effective in the long run. And I promise you: I will not ask any of you to do anything that I am not willing to do right alongside you. And now!" He clapped his hands together eagerly. "Let us see where we stand. How many of you have ever heard of the Gauntlet?"

James glanced around the room. No one raised their hand this time. Debellows seemed undeterred.

"The Gauntlet is an ancient tool used by those training for battle. It is a sort of clockwork obstacle course. Granted, being wizards, we have outfitted ours with certain, er, specialized capabilities. There is no point to the Gauntlet other than to surpass it. Surely, you have all heard the phrase 'run the gauntlet'? I am about to illustrate what that phrase actually means."

Debellows paced briskly across the room and stopped at the end of the line of clockwork apparatuses. He clasped his hands to his elbows and twisted back and forth at the waist, jumped from foot to foot half a dozen times, and then finally dropped to a crouch. He extended one arm, pointing his wand at the line of devices.

"Defendeum!" he barked.

Immediately, the apparatuses ratcheted, whirred, and clanked to life. Debellows launched forward, tucking and rolling beneath the first device as it swung a padded club across his path. With a grunt, the man leapt into the remaining clockwork. He moved in a sort of muscular ballet, lunging, crouching, and leaping through the mechanical melee. He dodged spinning wheels of padded fists, ducked under Stunning Spells fired from a bank of pop-up wands, leapt over kicking pommels and snapping padded jaws, and finally dove, flipped, and landed neatly on his feet at the end of the Gauntlet.

There was no applause this time. James stared, horrified, at the wildly thrashing clockwork monstrosity.

"So!" Debellows called over the noise of the Gauntlet, jamming his fists onto his hips. "Who'll be first up, then?"

"He's completely daft!" Graham exclaimed as he limped his way to History of Magic. "He must've taken one too many Stupefies to the brain when he was a Harrier or something!"

"No spells until Year Four," Ralph said, shaking his head. "And what was that stuff at the end? Who's Artis Decerto?"

"It's not a who, it's a what," Rose said, falling in next to Ralph. "It's a sort of magical version of karate."

James nursed his elbow where it'd been pummeled in the Gauntlet. "Where are you going, Rose?"

"History of Magic," she replied primly.

Ralph glanced at her. "Our History of Magic?"

"I don't know what you mean by that," Rose said, pulling herself to her full height, which was approximately to Ralph's Adam's apple. "My schedule has me in History of Magic, second period, Professor Binns. I can't help it if my advisor suggested I skip to some higher-level classes. So things didn't go so well with Professor Debellows?"

"We aren't supposed to call him 'Professor'," Graham said sourly. "He wants to be our mate, don't you know."

"The kind of mate that makes you do fifty pushups if you can't manage to avoid getting plastered by a giant, padded fist," Ralph said mournfully.

"I hate to say it, but it will probably do some of you some good," Rose said, eyeing the boys appraisingly.

"Just wait until you have *your* first class with him," James growled. "See how perky *you* are afterwards."

As they filed into the History of Magic classroom, the ghostly Professor Binns seemed to be in midlecture. His back was turned as he wrote on the chalkboard with a piece of phantom chalk. Strangely, he seemed to be writing notes on top of older notes, creating a nonsensical mish-mash. There was the distinct impression that the chalkboard contained years of the professor's ghostly writings, layer upon layer fading into dimness. As James knew, Binns had only the slightest grip on temporal reality. Last year, Ted had told James that the school had tried to move the History of Magic classroom to another wing so as to make space for the visiting Alma Alerons. Unfortunately,

Professor Binns continued to promptly appear in the old room every day to perform his lectures despite the fact that the classroom had been temporarily converted to an Alma Aleron girls' dormitory. No amount of persuasion could convince the ghost to relocate his classes, and the room was shortly converted back to a classroom.

Awkwardly, the students found their seats and began to produce parchments and quills. After a minute, Rose cleared her throat rather loudly and called the professor's name. Binns stopped writing on the chalkboard and turned, peering mistily back at Rose through his spectacles.

"Yes, Miss Granger?"

There was a ripple of laughter and Rose reddened. "I'm not Miss Granger, sir. I'm Rose Weasley, her daughter. I, er, think we missed the first part of your lecture."

"Another generation already," Binns muttered to himself. "Very well, then."

The ghost reached for a phantom eraser and began to swipe it across the chalkboard, producing absolutely no effect.

"You'll never make sense of his notes. You just have to listen to his lecture," Graham whispered confidentially. "It's a challenge, but the good news is that he's been giving the same tests for forty years. The answers are carved right into the tops of the desks. See?"

James had had Professor Binns last year, but he'd not heard this particular legend. He looked down at the worn graffiti carved into the desktop. Sure enough, buried in the center, was a list of numbered terms and phrases. At the top, like a headline, was the phrase, 'WHEN IN DOUBT, JUST SAY "GOBLIN REBELLION"'.

"That's cheating," Rose said without much conviction. "Er, technically."

"You will recall," Binns said, removing his glasses and wiping them absently on his ancient, ghostly lapel, "last year, we completed our studies with the end of the magical Dark Ages, in which men and wizards finally parted ways after centuries of unrest. The magical world allowed the Muggle kingdoms to believe that they had dispersed and eventually died out. Contrariwise, of course, the magical world developed in secret, as it has existed ever since, bypassing the typical frictions inherent in the interaction of the magical and the nonmagical. This brings us to the very beginnings of the modern age of wizard history, in which strictly magical establishments came into existence. This year, we will study the histories of those establishments, from governments to economy to education. Initially, nearly all of those details were managed inside the same walls, and by the same people. You may be aware that this very castle was the center of the magical world for quite some time before it was exclusively classified as a place of learning."

Rose studiously scribbled notes on her parchment. Ralph was watching her with curious fascination, either because of her persistence in taking notes or because her handwriting was so meticulously precise. James wished Zane was here to make an amusing drawing of Professor Binns. Idly, he

doodled on his own parchment.

"Magical photography," Binns continued, "while much older than the Muggle equivalent, was still in its infancy at the founding of Hogwarts. Here, in what was, at the time, still an experimental medium, we see the only remaining photographic representation of the original founders of Hogwarts."

James looked up to see the professor pointing his ghostly wand at a small, framed picture on the wall. James squinted at it but couldn't quite make it out. He hadn't known there were any photos of the founders and he was quite curious to see what they really looked like. He glanced around the room, but no one else seemed to be having any difficulty making out the ancient photo. James pressed his lips together. It was going to have to happen sooner or later. As quietly as he could, he reached into his bag and found the little pocket that held his new glasses. He slipped them out and, as surreptitiously as possible, put them on. Immediately, the ancient photo came into focus.

"Technically, it is not a photograph as we would know it, but a sort of flash-painting created with specially hexed paints. In any event, the result is a faithful, if crude, image. Here we see all four of the original founders standing in front of their statues in the original rotunda. This was taken rather late in their careers, upon the occasion of the naming and dedication of Hogwarts as a school of witchcraft and wizardry over ten centuries ago."

James studied the ancient image. It was indeed very grainy and only in black and white. Still, he could clearly make out the four figures, two witches and two wizards. Godric Gryffindor's long face wore his famous mustache and pointed goatee. Salazar Slytherin's features were pinched, with sharp cheeks and chin. He was perfectly bald. Helga Hufflepuff was tall and severe-looking, with long braided hair. Rowena Ravenclaw wore her greying black hair loose, framing a beautiful, smiling face with large, dark eyes. Behind them could be seen their statues, but only from the waist down. The statues had indeed been very large.

"Look," Graham whispered, pointing at the photo, "there's the ghost in the plinth! You can see it off on the side, next to the statue on the far right, just like in Rita Skeeter's book!"

Ralph looked puzzled. "The ghost in the plinth?"

Rose made a pained face. "It's just a myth, Ralph," she whispered. "It was in a book that came out a few years ago: The Founders' Codex. It says that there are secrets buried in a bunch of ancient paintings and pictures and things. Supposedly, there's a ghostly face hidden in the shadows of the statue plinth in the founders' photo."

"It's right there," Graham rasped. "Skeeter says it was hexed into the photo by Salazar Slytherin himself as a warning of his final curse. It's supposed to be the face of the heir of Slytherin. Of course, that's old news now. The Chamber of Secrets is well-known. It was on the Hogwarts tour up until a few years ago when they shut it down for being unsafe."

A Hufflepuff named Ashley Doone whispered from the row behind James, "I can see the ghost in the plinth, too! It looks like… like it's wearing glasses! Why, James," she said conspiratorially, "I think

the ghost in the plinth is you!"

James spun to glare back at her. She grinned and covered her mouth. When James turned back, Rose and Ralph were also looking at him.

"Since when do you wear glasses?" Ralph asked in a whisper.

"I don't!" James rasped. "I just need them to see… things. Far away. Sometimes. Hardly ever!"

"They're kind of cute, James," Rose smiled. "In a brainy sort of way."

James yanked the glasses off and jammed them back into his bag. Rose looked back at the ancient photo as Professor Binns burbled on obliviously.

"And Ashley's right," Rose whispered, smiling playfully. "The ghost in the plinth does look a little bit like you. I didn't even see it at first."

"Go jump off a turret," James mumbled, returning to his doodling.

That evening, after dinner, James and Rose sat amongst a pile of books and parchments at a corner table in the Gryffindor common room.

"It's only our first day back," James complained. "I can't believe I'm already sick of homework."

Rose dipped her quill. "If you'd stop complaining about it and just do it, it wouldn't seem like so much work."

"Thanks for the pep talk," James grumbled, flipping randomly through an enormous dusty book. "So how many classes am I going to be sharing with you this year anyway? I mean, besides History of Magic and Transfiguration. It's a little embarrassing, you know."

"I can't imagine why," Rose said without looking up from her parchment, "it's no reflection on you that I got my mum's grasp of basic magical principles. You, on the other hand, got your dad's grasp of slouching off your studies until the very last minute. It's simple genetics."

James sat up. "You're already done with your Transfiguration homework, then? Maybe you could give me a hand with mine since you're so smart. After all, we're family."

"You obviously have me confused with someone else," Rose said, stuffing her books into her bag and

zipping it. "That might've worked on my mum back in the day, but that's only because she had an overdeveloped sense of responsibility. My Weasley heritage offsets that nicely. By the way, shouldn't you be wearing your glasses to do your homework?"

James threw her a wilting look. "I only need them to see far away, thank you very much. I'd appreciate it if you kept the whole glasses thing to yourself."

"It's no big deal. Lots of people wear glasses."

"Lots of perfect spods," James groused dismally.

"Damien wears them," Rose pointed out. "And Professor McGonagall. Fiera Hutchins wears them and they look totally cute on her, even if she is a Slytherin. And Clarence Templeton, and Scorpius…"

James nearly knocked his books off the table. "Scorpius wears glasses? How do you know?"

Rose blinked at James. "I saw him wearing them in Herbology. He needs them to read, I would guess. Unlike you, he seemed perfectly comfortable wearing them in class. They look rather sporting, in fact. They're rimless, with tortoiseshell sides—"

"All right, all right," James said, waving his hand dismissively. "This isn't making it any better."

"Despite what you may think," Rose said, leaning in and lowering her voice, "he's not stupid. He may not be the nicest boy in school, but he knows his stuff."

"He knows how to cast a few spells, big deal," James said, crossing his arms. "His parents probably hired him one of those goblin tutors just to make sure he could show the rest of us up."

Rose shrugged and looked pointedly across the room. "Looks like he's done with his homework, at any rate."

James followed his cousin's gaze. Scorpius sat slouched in the high-back chair near the fireplace. He was idly flicking his wand, floating a bit of paper folded to resemble a bat. It bobbed and swooped easily.

"Bloody show-off," James grumbled under his breath.

Cameron Creevey saw James looking. He stood and approached the table tentatively. "Hey, James! How was your first day?"

"Lousy," James griped. "You any good at Transfiguration, Cameron?"

Cameron shook his head. "I haven't even had my first class, sorry. I just wanted to ask you: is it true about last year? About the aligning of the planets and how you were there for Merlin's return and all that stuff about how you sent that Muggle news fellow packing?"

"Well," James began, and then shrugged tiredly, "yeah, sure, I guess. It's probably all true enough, but it wasn't like it sounds. I was trying to stop Merlin's return, you know. So really, it was all a big bust."

Cameron grinned, showing a lot of pink gums. "That's totally excellent!" he exclaimed. "My dad, he's Dennis Creevey, he went to school with your dad, Harry Potter, right?"

"Sure, if you say so," James agreed, smiling. The boy's enthusiasm was rather contagious. "But I'm not like him, Cameron, really. I'm just a kid. See? No lightning bolt scar. Besides, I had loads of help."

"Yeah, I heard," Cameron nodded. "Ralph Deedle, whose dad's real name is Dolohov! Nobody saw that one coming, did they? Still, makes sense in hindsight. At least that's what my dad says."

Rose smirked and pretended to read one of James' books. James shook his head wonderingly. "Where did you get all this, Cameron?"

"Oh, all the first-years have been talking about it. We can't wait to see what you get up to this year!"

James frowned. "This year?"

"Sure!" Cameron enthused. "I mean, it's just like in your dad's day! Every year, he got in some great adventure, didn't he? We've got all the old Daily Prophet articles at home as well as the novelizations. I know the books are a little exaggerated, but my dad, he was there for some of it, and he says they don't even do the real stories justice. My favorite is the one about the Triwizard Tournament, especially the bits with the dragon!"

James held up his hands, stopping Cameron. "Look, those books are about my dad. Not me. Things are different these days, aren't they? There's no more Voldemort, no more big, scary, evil society bent on taking over the world. Last year was a fluke, all right? Besides, I wasn't a hero like my dad was. If I hadn't had Ralph and Zane—"

"Zane?" Cameron interrupted. "He's the one from the States?"

"Yes," James laughed, exasperated. "He—"

James jumped as something rapped against the window behind him. He spun around, eyes wide. The window was perfectly black. He stared at his reflection in the old glass. "What the—"

The rap came again, louder, shaking the window in its pane. A small object had thrown itself against the window from the outside. It looked like a moth, but with glowing green wings. James focused on it, furrowing his brow.

"What is it?" Rose asked, coming around the table to join James.

James shook his head. The moth threw itself against the window again, rattling the glass with its

wings. It was remarkably strong considering its size.

"It's a lunarfly," Rose said, recognizing the flying shape. "Let it in before it knocks itself senseless. They're harmless."

James unlatched the window and swung it open just as the lunarfly dove again. It shot through the open window and past James. Cameron ducked as the glowing moth spun out over the room. It swooped wildly, flitting through the students scattered around the room, leaving a trail of faintly glowing dust behind it. Scorpius sat up and peered at the moth, narrowing his eyes, as it wove and arced, drawing dusty greenish lines in the air. Finally, as if exhausted, the moth fluttered to a halt on the table, landing on James' pile of books. It folded its wings and twitched its antennae at James.

"Whoa!" Cameron said excitedly. James raised his eyes.

The lines of glowing dust had condensed into a shape. It floated in the air, drifting very slowly toward the ground. James recognized the shape. He grinned.

"Cameron, meet Zane," James said, gesturing to the familiar face formed by the glowing dust. "Zane, we were just talking about you. How'd you know?"

The dusty representation of Zane's face smiled. "It works! Hi, James! Hold on a second. Raphael, Anna, tell Professor Franklyn it works. I'm getting through! They can see me! All right, anyway. Hey, everybody. Hi, Rose! Where's the Ralphinator?"

"He and Albus are down with the Slytherins," James replied. "Zane, what is this?"

Zane's shimmering face grimaced as if to say it's a long story. "You ever hear the bit about the Chaos Butterfly? The one that flaps its wings in Paris and causes a hurricane in Los Angeles? Well, this is that butterfly. It's a moth, really, but the point is it doesn't cause the hurricanes, it just knows when they're going to happen. Franklyn says it has some sort of psychic connection to the cosmos. Anyway, it can tune into stuff thousands of miles away. The trick was just to get it to tune into the right thing. At the moment, it's tuned in to my face over here at Alma Aleron. So how do I look?"

James leaned in, studying the strange, glowing phenomenon. "Like a seasick ghost."

"That's as good as it gets, for now," Zane nodded. "Still, it's a big leap for the Department of Experimental Magical Communications. Raphael says we'll probably get a grant for this. Anyway, I've only got a minute before the dust settles. How are you all doing?"

"Fine," James replied. "Tell Cameron here that there aren't going to be any more exciting adventures this year."

"There better not be," Zane agreed. "James swore them off last year, Cam. That's the only reason I let my parents drag me back to America. Anyway, I'm fading out, I can tell. I'll be in touch, you guys. We have a few other techniques to test out. Should be fun!"

"All right, Zane," James called as the glowing face began to disintegrate. "See you later!"

"Wait!" Zane's voice cried, growing faint. "Did I hear you say your brother was with the Slyth…" His voice vanished as the glowing moth dust faded out of the air. On the table in front of James, the moth flexed its wings. It took off again and flitted silently through the open window. James clasped it shut.

"That was dead brilliant!" Cameron suddenly exclaimed. James smiled, shook his head, and shooed the smaller boy away. The rest of the Gryffindors in the common room went back to their business.

"That's complete nonsense," Rose said, settling back into her seat. "There's no such thing as the Chaos Butterfly. It's just a metaphor."

James grinned smugly at Rose. "You do fancy him!"

Rose scowled at him. "Now why in the world would you say that?"

"Because," James said simply, "you waited until he was gone to say that."

Rose blushed and looked away, fuming.

"See?" James said, nudging her. "I'm not a dolt about everything, am I?"

Rose harrumphed and gathered her bag. "Enjoy your Transfiguration homework," she said, standing. "And by the way, I saw your History of Magic homework answers. You got three of them wrong, and I'm not going to tell you which ones." She batted her eyes and smiled sweetly. "Goodnight, then!"

James slumped in his chair, watching her stalk up the stairs to the girls' dormitory. Across the room, Cameron grinned at him.

No more adventures this year, James thought. That was a good thing, wasn't it? Of course it was. Besides, the trio was broken. Zane was gone, back across the ocean and in a completely different time zone. *That* had never happened to Harry Potter. It had always been Harry, Ron, and Hermione, the magic trio, inseparable even to this day. Not so for James, and that, he told himself, was just fine. Let Albus have an adventure if there was one to be had. After all, he was the one everyone said looked just like Dad when he'd been younger.

James' forehead itched. Without thinking about it, he scratched it, pushing his unruly hair up. Just like he'd told Cameron, there was no lightning bolt scar there. James wasn't his father.

When James lowered his hand, he saw Scorpius Malfoy staring at him from across the room. His face was inscrutable. After a moment, Scorpius looked away, as if bored. If there was any proof that the era of Harry Potter style adventures was over, it was sitting right over there: Scorpius Malfoy with a Gryffindor crest embroidered on his robes.

James sighed, opened his Transfiguration textbook, and began his homework.

The first days of school passed in a blur. James attended his classes and made a concerted effort to take notes and tackle his homework. His diligence sprang partly from his own resolve not to get behind early in the year, but was also partly due to the presence of Rose in many of his classes. She served as a constant, disgruntled source of competition since James was determined not to allow his first-year cousin to outperform him despite her natural braininess.

One class Rose didn't share with James was Care of Magical Creatures, which was still taught by Hagrid. Hagrid embarrassed James by greeting him with a gigantic, bone-cracking bear hug at the beginning of class.

"I didn't have th' chance to say so at th' service, James," Hagrid said in what he thought was a confidential voice, "but I'm so sorry about your Granddad. Arthur was a great man, 'e was."

James nodded, a little annoyed at having been reminded of his granddad's death. It had been a few days since he'd thought about it. Hagrid invited the class to sit on the multitude of pumpkins maturing in his garden. He spent the period explaining what the class was about and describing the animals he'd introduce the students to over the course of the year. James didn't listen particularly closely, gazing instead out over the lake, his thoughts far away and melancholy.

During his Wednesday free period, James sat with Ralph and Rose at a table in the library. He took the opportunity to write a short letter to his parents. When he was finished, it occurred to him to write a note to his Cousin Lucy as well, as he'd promised. He dipped his quill and jotted the first things that came to his mind.

Dear Lucy,

Hi! I hope Uncle P. and Aunt A. aren't dragging you all over the place too much, but if they are, I hope you are having some fun and seeing some cool stuff. The school year is starting all right. The new Defence teacher is Kendrick Debellows, the famous Harrier. Ask your dad if you don't know who he is. He's pretty hardcore, and he doesn't have much good to say about Aurors, so that class looks to be a bust. Al would say hi if he knew I was writing you. He ended up in Slyth after all! I promised I would let him tell Mum and Dad, but he didn't say I couldn't tell you. Rose is sitting right here and she says hi and get a picture of anything cool you see if you are anyplace interesting, even if you're sick of seeing it all. Tell Mol we all said hello. Send a letter and any pics back with Nobby, all right?

Sincerely, James

James let Rose sign the letter to Lucy as well. When they were done, he took the letter back and reread it. Then, thoughtfully, he added:

P.S. If you get bored, you could do me a little favor. Look up anything you can find about something called the Gatekeeper or the Sentinel of Worlds. It might be a bit hard to dig up, but I know you like figuring stuff out, and it'd be a great help to me. But don't say anything to anyone else about it. I promised to keep it a secret. Thanks.

James finished writing, then quickly sealed both letters and stuffed them into his satchel. That afternoon, after their last classes, Rose and Ralph accompanied James to the Owlery. There, James attached the letters to Nobby's leg whilst Rose and Ralph stood near the door.

"I'm glad I brought a cat," Rose said, wrinkling her nose. "This place is right rancid."

"Cats can't deliver post," James replied.

"Well, an owl can't snuggle up on your lap by the fireplace."

Ralph nodded. "Or cough a hairball on your shoe."

Rose elbowed him. James finished attaching the letters to Nobby and stood back.

"Take Mum and Dad's letter first, Nobby. Lucy might send some stuff back."

Nobby screeched agreement. He spread his wings, balanced on the perch for a moment, and then launched. James craned his head as Nobby thrust upward, past the ranks of his fellow owls, and disappeared through a window at the top of the Owlery.

As the three students made their way back through the castle to dinner, James asked Rose pointedly, "So how was your first Defence Against the Dark Arts class?"

Rose pressed her lips together and hefted her satchel. "He wouldn't let me run the Gauntlet."

Ralph glanced at her. "Well, that's a good thing, right?"

"No, Ralph, it isn't. The boys all had to run it. Debellows says girls are 'too delicate' for it. He set us up doing one-on-one drills with each other. None of the other girls take it seriously, either. It was a complete waste of time."

"I hadn't really noticed it," James said, "but now that you mention it, he doesn't have any girls run the Gauntlet in our class either."

"Or face the clockwork ogre," Ralph added. "That club may be padded, but it packs a wallop."

"You should be glad you're a girl, then, Rose," James said fervently. "It's your free pass out of that bruise factory."

Rose shook her head, annoyed. "You're both completely missing the point! Girls aren't any less capable than boys. I bet I could beat most of you through the Gauntlet if I had a chance."

James stared incredulously at her. "You want to go through that thing?"

"Well," she replied, hedging a bit, "not really. I mean, it does look pretty brutal. But it's the principle of the matter."

Ralph shook his head. "This is the first time in my life I wish I'd been born a girl."

"I'm going to write Mum and Dad about it," Rose declared firmly. "When Mum hears that…"

Rose's voice trailed away as a cold push of air suddenly rippled her robes. James and Ralph felt it as well. The three stopped in the corridor, glancing around.

James frowned. "What was that?"

Neither of the others responded. There didn't appear to be any obvious source of the breeze. There were no windows in this section of the castle. Closed doors lined the walls, lit by a series of lanterns hung on chains. As James looked, the lantern at the end of the corridor winked out. James nudged Ralph and pointed.

Ralph's voice wavered. "Was that already burnt out, or did it just—"

The lantern next to it flickered and died, as if someone had blown the flame out.

"Maybe it's just the wind," Rose said uncertainly. "Come on, let's—"

Two more lanterns blinked out in quick succession. James glanced at Rose, then Ralph, his eyes wide. Suddenly, much stronger than before, a cold wind tore down the corridor, streaming through their robes and whipping their hair. It blew the rest of the lanterns out, throwing the corridor into murky darkness.

"Look!" Rose cried breathlessly, her voice unnaturally high. James and Ralph followed her shaking, pointing hand. There was a figure moving down the corridor. It floated above the floor, its head lowered, obscuring the face. It drifted toward them swiftly and silently. James grabbed Ralph and Rose's sleeves, pulling them as he attempted to back away, but his legs felt frozen. The figure was moving too quickly. It was nearly upon them. Suddenly, just as it heaved directly in front of them, it raised its head.

Ralph gasped. Rose uttered a little scream. James blinked.

"Cedric?" he exclaimed, his heart pounding. "What are you doing?!"

The ghost of Cedric Diggory straightened and grinned at them. "I've been practicing," he said in his distant, ghostly voice.

"Y-you know him?" Rose stammered, recovering a little.

"Yeah, we know him," Ralph replied. "That wasn't right, Ced. What was that all about anyway?"

Cedric looked taken aback. "I'm the 'Specter of Silence'. I've been practicing over the summer, trying to create a little mystique. What, was it too much?"

James nodded, his eyes wide. "Yeah, I'd say it was a bit much! Can you, you know, fix the lights?"

The ghost glanced back at the snuffed lanterns. "Actually, they're a lot easier to put out than to relight. Hold on."

Cedric closed his eyes and screwed up his face. After a moment, two of the lanterns flickered back alight.

"That's a bit better," Rose sighed. "But still. Don't do that again, all right? At least not to me."

Cedric smiled. "You must be Hermione's daughter. You have her hair, although it's a bit redder."

"I prefer the term 'auburn'," Rose said. "Anyway, yes. Nice to meet you, er, Cedric. I remember hearing about you. Care to accompany us to dinner?"

Cedric looked thoughtful. "I don't think so. It's not good for the mystique, hanging about in the Great Hall with everyone there."

"All the other ghosts do it," Ralph commented. "The Bloody Baron's down there nearly every meal, waving his sword around and teaching the first-years bad words."

"Yeah…," Cedric agreed doubtfully. "That's fine for him. He's been around since forever…"

James narrowed his eyes. "How many people have seen you, Cedric? I mean, not counting us?"

The ghost floated nervously. "Besides you? Er… does the portrait of Snape count?"

James shook his head.

"What about the Muggle intruder?"

"No."

"Well," Cedric admitted, "that's pretty much it, then."

"Wait a minute," Rose said, raising her hand. "You're a shy ghost?"

Cedric grimaced. "Not 'shy'. I was never shy. I've just been… busy."

"Busy learning how to blow out lanterns and practicing being the 'Specter of Silence'?" James clarified, tilting his head.

"Look, it's just different, that's all," the ghost said. "I haven't been down to a dinner in the Great Hall since the night I died, over twenty years ago."

Ralph spoke up, "So? Not much has changed, I'm guessing. From the looks of things down there, they've been running it pretty much the same since the founders themselves. Come on, it'll be fun even if you can't exactly eat the food."

Cedric shook his head sadly. "I can't. Not yet." He heaved a ghostly sigh. "Last time I was there, I sat with my friends. I was on my way out to what I hoped would be a victory in the final challenge of the Triwizard Tournament. Everybody toasted me with their pumpkin juice and wished me good luck. I promised them I'd tell them all about my adventure the next day at dinner, with or without the victory cup…" Cedric's ghostly eyes had gone thoughtful. "Cho Chang met me by the door on the way out of the hall. She wished me luck in the maze. I wanted to kiss her, but I didn't, not right there in the entrance to the Great Hall with everyone looking. I promised myself I would kiss her afterwards. Actually, I think I cared even more about that than I did about winning the cup. Kissing Cho was going to be the real prize…" Cedric paused, and then blinked, shaking himself. He glanced at James, Rose, and Ralph, as if remembering they were there. "But that never happened, of course. It feels like it was yesterday. It feels like if I went down to dinner now, Cho would be there, watching for me. There would be Stebbins, and Cadwallader, and Muriel, all anxious for me to regale them with the details of my trip through the maze. That's how it feels to me, but it's not true. They wouldn't be down there. Not really. They've all grown and moved on. I'm just a distant memory. Instead, my old table would be full of people I don't know. They'd not even recognize me." He shook his head again. "Maybe someday I'll be able to come down. But not yet. I can't."

Rose reached out to pat Cedric's arm, but her hand went right through it. "I'm so sorry, Cedric," she said. "You can come with us whenever you want to. Your old friends won't be there, but there might be some new friends waiting."

Cedric nodded and smiled, but James didn't think the ghost believed Rose's words.

"Will we be seeing you around?" James asked him.

"Sure," Cedric agreed. "Maybe the whole 'Specter of Silence' thing is a bit too much. Next time, I'll tone it down."

The three students turned and made their way back along the corridor. As they rounded the corner, James glanced back. There was no sign of Cedric's ghost, but James had a sense that he was still there anyway. James waved goodbye, then caught up to Ralph and Rose.

As they passed the great open doorway looking out over the courtyard, James stopped. In the blue

evening gloom, a small group of students was gathered near the gate. James noticed they were all Slytherins, and Albus was standing in the center of them. With a start, James realized it was Wednesday night, the night Tabitha Corsica had planned to 'make arrangements' with Albus.

"Hold up," James said quietly, stopping Ralph and Rose. As casually as he could, he sauntered over to the door and slipped into the shadows, watching the group of Slytherins.

"What's going on out there?" Rose asked, joining James. James shushed her.

Tabitha was talking to Albus, smiling prettily, nodding her head. Philia Goyle and Tom Squallus hovered nearby along with a few other Slytherins whom James didn't know. James couldn't hear what they were saying. As the crowd shifted, James saw that Tabitha Corsica was holding something tall and thin, wrapped in a black sleeve.

"That's most of the Slytherin Quidditch team," Ralph explained in a low voice. "There's Beetlebrick. He's the Keeper. Fiera and Havelock are Beaters."

James narrowed his eyes. "One guess what Corsica has in that black cover."

The Slytherins suddenly turned and began to walk out of the courtyard. Albus was leading, laughing, and gesturing happily. James slipped through the doorway, following.

"Where are you going?" Ralph asked.

"What's it look like? I'm going to follow them. Corsica is planning to put Al on that flying curse of hers."

Ralph grimaced. "What are you planning to do, stop them?"

"I know you can't help me, Ralph," James said quickly, "since they're your housemates and all. But I'm going to go see what they're planning, at least."

"It's not that," Ralph replied. "I just think it's Albus' choice. I sort of think maybe… you shouldn't get involved."

"I'll take that into consideration," James muttered darkly. He jumped out into the quickly darkening courtyard. A moment later, he heard footsteps as someone followed him.

"You don't have to come, Rose," James said, stopping at the courtyard gate.

"What kind of a thing is that to say?" she whispered harshly. "I was going to spy on them whether you did or not."

James smiled at her. Together, they hunkered down and slunk around the edge of the gate, watching for the departing Slytherins. The gloom of the approaching night made it difficult to see. After a moment, Rose pointed. James followed her direction and saw the robed figures cresting a hill a

hundred yards away. They were heading for the Quidditch pitch, of course. Keeping as low as they could, Rose and James followed.

As they neared the pitch, James motioned for Rose to follow him. He led her in a curving path around the side of the Gryffindor grandstand. As quietly as they could, they crept up the wooden staircase to the lowest level. There, they crouched before the guardrail and peered down into the dark pitch.

The group of Slytherins stood on the centerline. James could hear their voices indistinctly. Tabitha seemed to be the one speaking. There was some motion as the figures moved about, and James silently cursed himself for leaving his glasses in his bag.

"What's going on?" he whispered helplessly. "I can barely see who is who."

"Tabitha just took the cover off of a broom," Rose whispered back. "She seems to be explaining how it works to Albus. He looks pretty anxious to fly it. He can barely stand still. Looks like he has to go to the loo."

James could see what happened next. Tabitha held the broom out to Albus. He took it in both hands and looked at it, then looked back up at her. James couldn't see his face, but he knew Albus was grinning that infectious, reckless grin of his. Finally, the other Slytherins stepped back away from him, leaving him in the center of a rough circle. Albus hefted the broom with one hand, as if testing its weight and balance on his palm. Then, deftly, he tossed it into the air. It came down and bobbed next to him at hip height. James struggled with the urge to shout out, to warn Albus. James had ridden that broom once, and it had been a dreadful disaster. There was something extremely unusual about the magic of it. It had fought James and very nearly killed him. When Tabitha rode it during Quidditch matches, it seemed to exercise a very suspicious influence over the brooms around it, and even, James suspected, the Snitch itself. Rose hooked her hand into James' collar and pulled him down. James hadn't realized he'd begun to stand, preparing to call a warning to his brother. He glanced at her, his eyes wide.

"Don't," she mouthed, shaking her head.

James looked back down at the pitch. Albus reached out and wrapped his hand around the handle of the floating broom. Quickly, as if purposely not thinking about it, he swung a leg over it, straddled it, and kicked off. The broom shot straight up, spinning slowly and carrying Albus high into the deepening night. It reached the top level of the grandstands and stopped gently. Albus was merely a black shape outlined against the dusky sky. As James watched, he crouched low over the broomstick. It shot forward, perfectly in control. Distantly, Albus ballyhooed happily, his voice echoing over the nearby hills.

Rose leaned toward James. "I had flying lessons with Albus on Tuesday," she whispered. "He couldn't fly like that then."

James pressed his lips into a thin line. He glared down at the assembly of Slytherins on the field but couldn't make anything out. If any of them were directly influencing Albus' flight with their wands, he

couldn't tell it.

In the silence of the descending night, James could hear the swish and flap of his brother's inaugural flight. Albus flickered and swooped over the pitch and the nearby hills, whooping with delight. Finally, after a few minutes of random soaring, he dipped into a long, curving bank over all four of the house grandstands, picking up speed. James and Rose crouched as low as they could as Albus swept in over the Gryffindor gangway. He turned the broomstick easily and pulled it to a hovering stop near the flags that topped the grandstand. James held his breath, hoping that the shadow of the seats was enough to hide him and Rose. Albus took a deep breath, aimed the broom back down toward the pitch, and suddenly stopped. He seemed to be looking directly at James, but in the darkness, it was very hard to tell. He was probably looking past James, down to the Slytherins standing in the center of the pitch below. Finally, Albus leaned forward. The broomstick pitched into a steep dive, sweeping over the rows of seats. James crouched as low as he could, fearing Albus might actually graze him when he passed over the guardrail. As James ducked, a hand reached down and tousled his hair, fleetingly. The wind of Albus' passing subsided, and James heard his brother laughing as he swooped into the darkness of the pitch.

"That little prat!" James rasped. Rose shushed him.

Albus descended in a tightening circle, finally bringing the broom to a landing as gentle as a dandelion seed. The Slytherins applauded and collapsed around Albus, congratulating him.

"A natural," Tabitha's voice rang out on the breeze. "Just like your father."

"'Natural' nothing!" James hissed under his breath. Rose tugged at his robes, pulling him down into the shadows again. Together, they watched the group of Slytherins walk back across the pitch, their voices lost in the rising wind. As James watched, he saw Albus glance up at him and grin.

After a minute, James and Rose climbed down from the grandstand and retraced their steps back to the castle.

"You saw the way he operated that broom," James exclaimed, struggling to keep his voice low. "Or to be perfectly accurate, the way it operated him!"

Rose answered thoughtfully, "I admit it looked a little suspicious. But you said yourself you could barely control a broom until you got your Thunderstreak. Maybe Albus just needed to get on the right sort of broom to show his stuff."

James shook his head, exasperated. "You don't understand. I tried to ride that broom myself, once. It about murdered me!"

"Well, you weren't supposed to be riding it, then, were you? Some new brooms are smart that way. Even yours has the 'Extra-Gestural Enhancement' option, doesn't it? Once it bonded with you, anybody else who tried to ride it would have serious trouble."

"Look," James said, throwing up his hands, "you just have to trust me on this, Rose. That broom's cursed, somehow. And Tabitha is probably the one that cursed it."

Rose looked sideways at him. "Why would you say that?"

James shook his head. "It's a long story. But I'm telling you, there's something especially wicked about her. You probably wouldn't believe me even if I told you. Hardly anybody else does."

"Well," Rose replied, keeping her voice as even as possible, "maybe there's a good reason for that."

"Who's side are you on anyway?"

"Excuse me," Rose said, getting angry. "You mean am I on James Potter's side or Albus Potter's side? Because I didn't know I needed to choose."

James sighed hugely. "Just forget it. Sorry, Rose."

Rose looked at him for a long moment as they neared the courtyard gate. "Flying runs in the Potter blood, James. You can't know that Albus isn't just that good by his nature. The whole reason first-years are allowed to try out for Quidditch is because of how good your dad was his first year. But if there is something strange about that broom, or Tabitha Corsica herself, I'll be the first one to help you tell Albus about it. All right?"

James smiled wanly. "You promise?"

Rose nodded. Together, they entered the courtyard and climbed into the light of the main hall. Ralph was sitting on the bottom of the main staircase, waiting for them. James smiled.

"He flew it, I'm guessing," Ralph said, getting up to join them.

"How'd you know?" Rose asked.

"Albus and the rest just passed me on the way in to dinner," Ralph said. "Albus came over and told me to give you a message when you came in. He said he might just steal your place at the next family Quidditch match."

James rolled his eyes and glanced at Rose. "Don't you laugh," he said, pointing a finger at her.

"I didn't say anything," she replied, covering her mouth with her hand. "Come on. Let's get inside for dinner before they close the doors on us."

6. The King of the Cats

Thursday morning, James and Ralph's first class was Wizard Literature. The classroom was a semicircular gallery attached to the rear of the library. Windows lined the curving wall, filling the room with morning sunlight. The new Wizard Literature teacher, Juliet Revalvier, sat at her desk, leafing through a large book as the students found their seats. Compared to most of the Hogwarts teaching staff, Professor Revalvier was relatively young and petite. Her dark blonde hair was cut shoulder-length, framing an open, friendly face. With her reading glasses on, James thought she looked a bit like a brainy pixie.

"Not you again," Ralph whispered as Rose slipped into the seat next to him.

"I specifically asked to test into this class if I could," Rose explained, pulling her Wizlit textbook out of her book bag. "I've got all of Revalvier's books on the classics of magical literature. You know, she even wrote a few novels herself, a couple of decades ago, although they were mostly marketed to Muggles under a made-up name. It was all a bit controversial."

"Yeah, I know about those," James said, remembering Cameron Creevey and his mention of the novelizations of the adventures of Harry Potter. "That was her, was it?"

"Well, her and a few other people. It was a test project, spearheaded by one of the big wizard publishing companies. I think the problem was that it was, if anything, rather too much of a success. The Ministry ended up getting involved and there was quite a hoo-ha. Apparently, publishing true accounts of the wizarding world as fiction in the Muggle world is a violation of the Law of Secrecy, although the Wizengamot never convicted her of anything. She was stripped of most of her royalties, which explains why she ended up here, teaching."

As if on cue, Professor Revalvier closed her book and stood, tucking her reading glasses into her robe. She consulted the clock on the back wall of the room and cleared her throat.

"Behold, what manner of worlds are these," she said, smiling a little and letting her gaze roam from face to face across the room, "that conjure from the souls of men so readily the primest keystones of the heart? How were wrought these realms that no hand can touch, yet spear to the foundation of all that is most genuine? Dare I declare the pedestal upon which these kingdoms arise and the bricks its

walls comprise? Not stone nor wood nor precious jewels can stand the trials of time, further than the realms begotten of words and thoughts and rhyme."

The professor took a deep breath, then, in a different voice, said, "That was a quote from one of the magical world's oldest and most revered ballads, The Heraldium. There is no record of the author of that work, nor any reliable date of when it was penned. We know nothing of the time in which it was written: not who was king, not in what city it originated, not even the language that framed it. And yet the ballad itself persists. If there was any proof of the theme of the ballad—that there is no kingdom more beautiful, effective, and everlasting than the kingdom made of words—then that proof is The Heraldium itself, which has long outlasted the civilization that birthed it."

Out of the corner of his eye, James saw Rose scribbling notes feverishly. This, he knew, was just the sort of stuff she lived for. He looked down at his own parchment, which was still blank, and wondered if it was worth the effort to take his own notes, or if there was any hope of Rose letting him crib off of her.

"The magical world is very old, and therefore has a very rich literary history, as evidenced by the library adjacent," Revalvier went on, gesturing toward the packed bookshelves lining the back of the room. "We have no hope of exploring even a tenth of that history. We will, however, choose major works representative of each age, and by digging into them as deeply as we can, seek to better understand the times from which they come. Many people find literature boring. Those unfortunate people have simply never had the stories opened well for them. I will do my best to open these stories well for you, students. With any luck, we will see these tales come alive. And not just the tales in the special section of the library where the books must be chained to the shelves to keep them from escaping."

There was a ripple of polite laughter. Revalvier accepted it with a deprecating smile.

"We will begin our exploration of the world of magical literature with a challenge. Rather than a famous classic or a revered ballad, let us begin with something a bit more accessible. Let us have some volunteers. Will someone tell me, please, what was your favorite bedtime story whilst growing up?"

James looked around the room. A Ravenclaw girl named Kendra Corner raised her hand. Revalvier nodded at her encouragingly.

"Like, any story?" Kendra asked. "Even if it's short?"

Revalvier smiled. "Especially if it is short, Miss Corner."

"Well," Kendra said, her cheeks reddening a little, "my favorite story when I was little was *The Three Foolish Harridans*."

"Very good, Miss Corner," Revalvier said. "I imagine many of us have heard that account of the three old women taking their goods to market. A very old story, that, and an excellent example. Anyone

else?"

Graham answered next, "The story I remember most is the one about the giant and the beanstalk. Some Muggle kid finds some magic beans, and then climbs the magical beanstalk that grows out of them. A giant lives at the top, and the Muggle kid tries to pinch the giant's stuff, but the giant catches the kid and smashes him up into bread. The moral was about how careless magic brings trouble for everybody."

"Another classic example, Mr. Warton," Revalvier agreed, "although yours illustrates how stories tend to evolve over time, based on shifts in culture."

Several others described their favorite stories, ending with Rose, whose favorite story, not surprisingly, was one of the tales of Beedle the Bard. "Babbitty Rabbitty and her Cackling Stump. My mum read it to me from a very old version of the book she got from a former Headmaster, Albus Dumbledore," she said with some pride.

"Certainly, most of us are very familiar with *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*," Professor Revalvier said, leaning comfortably on her desk, "though not all of us were fortunate enough to be read them from such an illustrious source. Indeed, these are all very good examples of classic wizarding literature. They all have some very important things in common. They are all quite old. They are all primarily passed on by word of mouth. And they are all meant to teach important life lessons. Less obviously, these stories tell us subtle things about the times in which they were created. For instance, the days of frail old women pushing cartloads of goods to market are long past, and yet they seem familiar to us because we all grew up with the story of The Three Foolish Harridans. The beauty of great literature, even in the form of children's stories, is that they teach us things about life, history, the world we live in, and even about ourselves, without us ever knowing it. The point is, the very best lessons in life are the ones we are not aware of learning. These are the lessons literature can teach us."

"Let us look at another example, one which was not mentioned so far. When I was a little girl, my favorite bedtime story was a tale called *The King of the Cats*. Do any of you know that story?"

Tentatively, Ralph raised his hand. "I think I know that one, but my version might be a little different. I grew up with Muggles. Or so I thought."

"Many stories with magical origins have found their way into Muggle myth and legend, Mr. Deedle. Would you care to tell us the version you are familiar with?"

Ralph sucked his upper lip for a moment, thinking. "Well, all right," he agreed. He took a deep breath and began. "This man is going for a walk in the country one day, really far away from where he lives. No one else is around and there aren't any houses for days in any direction. All of a sudden, he sees a whole bunch of mice. At first, he thinks that he should chase them off, but then he notices that they aren't acting like regular mice. They seem to be walking in a sort of procession, and they are carrying something. The man crouches down behind some bushes because he doesn't want to scare the mice,

but he's really curious about what they are carrying. As they pass in front of him, he sees that they are carrying another mouse on a little tiny bed. The man realizes that the mouse on the bed is dead, and that this is a little mouse funeral procession.

"As quietly as he can, he follows the procession deep into the woods until they come to a big, wide clearing, all bright in the sun. In the center of the clearing is a tiny stone stairway leading to nothing. It just goes up and stops. There is a big cat sitting at the bottom of the stairs, blocking them. It's all striped and golden and very serious and solemn-looking. The cat watches the mouse procession as it crosses the clearing, getting closer and closer. The man almost calls out to the mice because he is sure the cat will eat them, funeral or not. But then the mice finally get to the cat and stop right in front of its paws. They put the tiny bed down and back away. The big gold cat is watching the whole time with its huge green eyes. Finally, it bends down and says something to the dead mouse. The mouse jumps up, alive and dancing. It darts between the golden cat's legs and runs up the little stone staircase. The man watches, still hiding, as the mouse runs right past the end of the stone stairs, still going up. The mouse climbs further into the sky, as if on invisible stairs, until it is completely out of sight. The man can hardly believe what he is seeing.

"When he looks down again, the rest of the mice are all gone. Only the big golden cat remains, and it is staring right at him with its big green eyes. The man is scared of the cat, so he turns on his heels and runs as fast as he can out of the woods. He doesn't stop running until he gets back on the path, and he runs the whole path all the way back to his own land and into his own house. That night, the man sits down at dinner with his family. He tells them everything he saw that day, and the last thing he says is, 'That cat was surely the King of the Mice!' Just then, the big old family cat, which up to that moment had been sleeping in front of the fire, jumps up on its hind feet and says, plain as day, 'Then I am the King of the Cats!' And it leaps up the chimney and is never seen again."

Ralph finished telling the story and the room fell strangely quiet. Professor Revalvier had her eyes closed, as if soaking in the story. The bright morning sunlight made the room feel strangely sleepy. It seemed to buzz with warmth, trancelike, as if time had slowed down while Ralph spoke.

"That was a wonderful telling, Mr. Deedle," Professor Revalvier said, opening her eyes slowly. "It was indeed slightly different than the version I remember from my youth, but interestingly so. Have any of the rest of you heard that story before?"

There were no hands in the room. Ralph glanced around, apparently rather surprised.

"What is curious about that story?" Revalvier asked the class. "Can anyone point out a specific difference from this tale and the others we mentioned earlier?"

Murdock raised his hand. "For one thing, it doesn't make any sense."

The professor inclined her head slightly. "Is that so? Does anyone else agree with Mr. Murdock's judgment?"

There were nods throughout the room.

"Not that I didn't like it," Morgan Patonia added, raising her hand. "It was nice. But it was also a little creepy."

Revalvier narrowed her eyes. "And contrary to what might be expected, the creepiness is somewhat appealing, yes?"

More nods in the room, although they were accompanied by puzzled looks.

"Why do you suppose your parents might not have told you this story, apart from Mr. Deedle, of course?"

There was a long pause. Finally, Rose raised her hand.

"All the stories I got told when I was growing up were nice stories," she said. "They sometimes had evil witches and wizards in them, but they didn't have any dead mice or anything. And they all ended happily, or at least had a moral to them that made them seem happy even if the main characters were unlucky or did the wrong thing."

Revalvier looked thoughtful. "And this story is not happy? Nor has a moral?"

James knew not to respond to an obvious question like that. Obvious answers were never the right answers. Revalvier seemed to approve of the silence.

"Tonight's homework, students, is for you to write down the story of The King of the Cats," she said, walking behind her desk. "I'd prefer that you not consult each other about how the story went. The point of this exercise is not to perfectly repeat the story as told by Mr. Deedle, but to write it as you remember it. If your version is somewhat different, all the better. Looking at how magical stories change through retelling is a very interesting way to learn things about the teller of the story. In this case, the teller is you, yourselves. We shall see after you have finished this task if you still feel that the story has no moral."

Revalvier sat down behind her desk and put her reading glasses back on. "You are exempted, of course, Mr. Deedle. A reward for your delightful recital of the story. And now, class, please turn in your textbooks to chapter one."

The remainder of the class was spent in a lecture about the historical background of the golden age of magical literature, from which sprang some of the most well-known (and least read) wizard classics. Revalvier assured the students that she would do 'everything necessary' to make the stories relevant to them, and James had some hope that she might actually succeed in that endeavor. He was quite curious about how she meant to do it, and looked forward to finding out.

As they left the class, James said to Ralph, "Nice work, speaking up like that. You saved yourself an essay."

Rose asked, "Did your dad really tell you that story when you were a kid?"

"Actually, no," Ralph admitted. "My grandma did, whenever I went to stay with her."

James glanced at Ralph. "I assumed it'd been your dad too. After all, he had the wizard background, growing up."

Rose commented, "Well, it's just like Professor Revalvier said. Lots of wizard stories leak out into Muggle culture as legends and myths. Obviously, *The King of the Cats* is like that. That's how Ralph's grandma knew it."

Ralph nodded. "She was full of stories like that. They were all a little weird and eerie, but I liked that about them. They were… well, they were sort of magical. I had really mad dreams whenever she told me those stories. Not bad dreams exactly, but…" He shook his head, unable to find the right word.

"That happens to me whenever I eat my Uncle Dmitri's special paprikash," Graham interjected. "He makes it every Christmas. He says the magic ingredient is powdered Mandrake root, but Mum says the magic ingredient is a pint of goblin rum."

James had expected the Wizlit essay to be fairly easy, but as he sat in the library that night with his quill and parchment, he found himself staring out the window at the moon, tapping his quill idly. Finally, he shook his head as if clearing it.

"It's really strange," he commented to Ralph, who was bent over his Arithmancy problems. "I can totally remember you telling us the story in class. I could probably sit here and tell it back to you right now. But when I try to write it down, it goes all murky in my head."

Ralph sat back and stretched. "What do you mean? If you could tell it, why can't you write it?"

"Beats me. I mean, I know it starts with a guy walking through the woods. I write down that much, and suddenly, I can't remember if it's day or night when he's walking. I start to imagine where he might be walking to. Why's he so far away from his own home? And why is it no one else lives anywhere around for miles and miles? It's mice he sees, right? Only, when I start to write, I keep imagining squirrels. Or voles."

"Voles?" Ralph repeated, making a face. "What in the world is a vole?"

"I don't know," James said, throwing up his hands. "Some kind of little animal, I guess. But that's just the thing. The story sort of squirts away whenever I try to write it down. It's like it wants to become something else entirely."

Ralph thought about it and finally shook his head. "That doesn't make a bit of sense. You want me to tell you how it goes again?"

James sighed. "No. Revalvier said we're not supposed to do it that way. She made it sound like we were supposed to write it down however we remembered it. I just didn't expect it to fight back. I mean, it's just a bedtime story."

Ralph shrugged. "Well, it is a magical bedtime story."

"Not your version," James replied. "Your Muggle grandma told you. I figured it had to be your mum's mum because as far as you knew, your dad was an orphan."

Ralph nodded but remained silent.

James was about to make another attempt at his version of *The King of the Cats* when Petra Morganstern walked slowly around the end of a nearby bookshelf.

"Hi, Petra," James said, trying to keep his voice low enough not to earn a stern look from the librarian.

Petra was rather listlessly scanning the bookshelf, her bag dangling from one hand. She seemed not to have heard him.

"I say hi, Petra!" James repeated, framing his mouth with his hands.

Petra turned and raised her eyes. She saw James and blinked, her large blue eyes distant. "Oh," she said. "Hi, James. Sorry. I didn't see you." She turned back to the bookshelves. "I'm not really sure what I'm looking for…"

James watched Petra as she moved down the aisle, dragging her bag. "What's with her?" he whispered to Ralph as she got out of earshot.

Ralph shook his head. "I don't know."

Rose plunked a pile of books on the table and sat down. "No harm getting a head start on Wizlit," she proclaimed happily. "These are the ten books the textbook says are a must-read for every thinking witch and wizard. I've read four of them before, but it never hurts to get a bit of a refresher."

"Hey, Rose," James interrupted, leaning close. "What's going on with Petra?"

"Petra?" Rose repeated, distracted. "Why should anything be going on with her?"

"She just went by a minute ago looking like her owl just died."

Rose thought for a moment. "I couldn't guess. She seemed fine at lunch today, although she left early when she got the package."

"What package?" Ralph asked.

"Oh, you two were already gone," Rose explained, pulling the top book off of her stack and opening it. "A box came by Ministry owl for her. Apparently, it was from her father. She left right afterwards. I assumed she wanted to open it in private."

James tilted his head. "Why would a package from her father come by Ministry owl?"

Rose raised her eyebrows. "I assume her father works there. Loads of people send personal mail using company post. Dad does it sometimes, although Mum says he shouldn't. Things like that get her a little uptight."

"Maybe it was bad news from home," Ralph mused.

"It looked like more than just a letter," Rose replied. "I assumed it was sweets from her mum or a birthday present or something."

James frowned, looking in the direction Petra had wandered. "If sweets from her mum make her look like that, Petra's mum must be a pretty rotten cook."

Rose suddenly brightened. She leaned in and whispered, "I just ran into Fiona Fourcompass over in the reference section, and she said she knows why this week's Muggle Studies classes have been postponed so far!"

Ralph said, "I thought it was just because Professor Curry wasn't back from some sort of research trip. Fine by me, too. She can go off researching for the whole term."

"That's sort of true," Rose nodded. "But it's what she's been researching that's key. She got back yesterday, and tomorrow afternoon there's going to be a big assembly of all the Muggle Studies classes for all years. She's going to make an announcement about this term's class, and whatever it is will affect everybody!"

James looked skeptical. "Fiona Fourcompass told you that? How would she know?"

"She saw Professor Curry earlier today, outside her office," Rose explained earnestly. "She was unpacking from her trip and she told Fiona about the assembly. She said afternoon classes will let out early so everyone can attend."

"Did she mention what the big deal was?" Ralph asked.

Rose shook her head. "She didn't say, and Fiona didn't ask. I'm really curious though."

"Well," James replied, "she had us playing football last year, and that was actually pretty fun. Maybe it'll be something like that. But why the whole school at once?"

"That'd be quite a football match," Ralph agreed.

A little while later, James, Ralph, and Rose noticed it was getting rather late. Most of the other students had gone and the librarian was blowing out the lanterns near the deserted tables. The three packed their books, quills, and parchments into their bags and threaded their way through the bookshelves.

"Hey, Rose," James asked, "have you started your Wizlit homework yet?"

"The King of the Cats essay? I finished it first thing. Why?"

James glanced at her. "Just curious, that's all. It wasn't… difficult?"

Rose shouldered her book bag. "Man walks through the woods, sees a bunch of mice having a funeral procession, follows them, so on and so forth. Easiest homework I had all night."

James frowned thoughtfully. "Oh. Well, good."

"I got a little confused when I got to the part with the skunk though," Rose added, angling toward the library doors.

"The skunk?" Ralph asked, blinking.

"Yeah. I couldn't remember if it was in front of the stairs or sitting on them. I forgot the color of its stripe too. It was green, right?"

Ralph stared at her, and then looked back at James. James shrugged and shook his head.

As they left the library, James saw that there was one other person still there. Sitting at a table in the rear alcove, alone in a pool of lamplight, was Petra. Her head was lowered, her long dark hair hanging on either side of her face like a curtain. On the table in front of her was a single piece of parchment. James waited to see if she'd look up, but she never moved. It pained him a little to see Petra so suddenly melancholy. He considered calling to her but decided not to. Most likely, he would see her later in the common room anyway. Perhaps she'd be in better spirits then.

James said goodnight to Ralph as they parted ways at the stairs. Rose accompanied James to the common room where they sat by the fireplace and watched a rowdy Winkles and Augers match for a while. Finally, they headed up the stairs to their respective dormitories. Scorpius was already in bed. He was sitting up, reading a book called True Stories of Dragons and Dragon Hunters. He was wearing his rimless spectacles, and they did, in fact, manage to make him look more dashing than dorky. He glanced over his glasses as James entered the room.

"Nice bedtime story," James muttered.

"Would you prefer The Three Foolish Harridans?" Scorpius drawled, turning a page. "Or maybe one of Revalvier's old bedtime stories about your father?"

James threw back the blankets on his new bed. The words 'WHINY POTTER GIT' still glowed a faint purple on the headboard. James' efforts to remove them had been entirely unsuccessful. He dressed in his pyjamas and climbed under the covers, throwing a disgruntled look at Scorpius.

"I hear your brother is looking good to make the Slytherin Quidditch team," Scorpius commented, his eyes still on his book.

James sat up again. "You keeping close tabs on your dad's house, Scorpius? Is he planning to come for the matches? I wonder who he'll support. A bit of a stumper, that one."

"I understand Albus is riding Corsica's broom," Scorpius said, finally looking James in the eye.

James met Scorpius' gaze, unsure what to say. Was Scorpius teasing him? Or was this some kind of warning? "Yeah, I know," James finally admitted. "I saw him. So what?"

"I had flying with dear little Albus earlier this week, along with your cousin Rose. Improved since then, has he?"

James rolled over. "What's it to you anyway?"

"Nothing, really," Scorpius said. "Just trying to make a little conversation. You intend to try out for the Gryffindor team, I assume?"

"Maybe I am," James admitted. "Are you?"

Scorpius didn't answer right away. James looked back over his shoulder. Scorpius glanced up from his book again. "No, Potter," he said, sighing. "Organized sport is so… parochial. Let's just say I'll be using my talents in less obvious ways."

James rolled his eyes and flopped over onto his side again. Scorpius was just trying to pique him. That's what his talent was, and apparently, James was his favorite target.

It wasn't until James was falling asleep that it occurred to him that he had not seen Petra come up to the common room after all.

James was just finishing his breakfast the next morning when Nobby swooped over him and dropped a letter onto his plate. James scooped it up quickly and waved at Nobby, who banked and flapped upwards through the rafters, disappearing through a window along with the rest of the morning's owls.

The letter was from Lucy, and it was surprisingly fat.

"What's that?" Rose asked, leaning toward James.

"A response from Lucy," James replied, quickly stuffing the letter into his bag.

"So read it already," Rose said, reaching for another piece of toast.

James clambered over the bench and stood. "Can't. I have to get to class. I've got to get to the North Tower. Divination this morning."

"I'm in the same class, James. We have plenty of time."

"I, uh, left my homework in the dorm. I better go and grab it."

Rose glared suspiciously at James, but he turned and trotted away before she could argue. He took a rather circuitous route in the direction of the North Tower but stopped at an empty stairway. He sat on the bottom step and retrieved Lucy's letter from his bag. As he tore it open he saw that the parchment was wrapped around a folded newspaper clipping. He read the letter first.

Dear James,

Thanks for writing. We're currently at home, which is very nice for me, but not so nice for getting any pictures of anything interesting for Rose, sorry. I had a feeling about Albus. Really, I don't think anyone will be very surprised about his ending up in Slytherin. I wondered if I might end up there myself. Is that awful of me? I do hope it's not. Daddy told me all about your Debellows teacher. He seems quite impressed with him, and is very proud to have met him a few times. I looked up the Gatekeeper like you asked. There was actually quite a lot of information about it. I just had to know where to look. Fortunately, since we're home, I have access to the wizarding library over in Notting Hill. Mum takes me there once a week, although she'd die if she knew what sections I had to go to research this. The Gatekeeper has loads of names, and all of them are pretty scary, which makes sense once you know what it is. According to the old myths, the Gatekeeper is the Guardian between the worlds of the living and the dead. It lives in something called the Transitus Nihilo—the Void between the worlds—and is a purely magical being. Basically, it's just this huge, lurking entity because it has no body and no boundary since it lives in pure nothingness. Supposedly, it doesn't even know about earth or humans because it is too arrogant to assume that there could be any living thing other than itself. But the scariest thing about it is something called 'the Curse of the Gatekeeper'. Salazar Slytherin talked a lot about it. He said it would be his 'Final Judgment' on those that betrayed him. Basically, the Curse says that someday the Gatekeeper will be summoned by a person called the Ambassador, who is a wizard powerful enough to travel into the Void. The Gatekeeper follows the Ambassador back, and its descent is a sign of total doom. Once it's here, the Gatekeeper feeds on horror and pain, sucking it out of people like a vampire sucks blood. The legends say it will study humans, learning how best to terrify them, and in the greatest numbers. Apparently though, it'll need to partner with a willing human host, a host that will be prepared to kill for it to prove their worth. All the prophecies say

this host will be a child of tragedy—probably meaning an orphan, somebody with nothing to lose. Very, very gruesome stuff. I am really curious, James: why are you asking about this? I'd be surprised if you are studying something like this in school. Why do you need to keep it a secret? This is seriously scary old magic. The book I read about it in nearly nipped my thumb off. Tell me, OK? Love, Lucy

P.S. This is a clipping from a Muggle newspaper I saw on the way home from the library. It's probably nothing, but I couldn't help noticing it after what I'd just read about. It's not connected, do you think?

James slowly folded the letter, his eyes wide. A cold sweat had beaded on his forehead. Lucy's words were eerily similar to some of the things Farrigan, the skeleton in the cave, had said. But surely, Merlin couldn't really be the Ambassador of such a horrible creature, could he? At least not knowingly. But either way, what if his long trek into the Void had summoned the thing called the Gatekeeper? James shook his head fretfully. The newspaper clipping slipped off his lap and fell onto the floor. James peered at it. He could tell by the colors and typeface that the clipping came from a Muggle tabloid. Reluctantly, he picked it up and unfolded it. He read the headline, grimaced, and then plunged into the article.

Entire Family Terrorized by 'Alien Ghost Demon'; Two Driven Insane

The quaint seaside village of Kensington Flats was rocked early this summer by rumors of a ghostly creature residents came to call the 'creature of smoke and ash'. Recognized by its fantastic appearance, the entity appeared on several occasions over the third week of May. In one instance, no less than a dozen villagers claimed to witness the entity in the Colt and Cockerel, a small pub on the village's outskirts. While none were willing to speak directly to *Inside View,* earlier reports claim that the entity exuded a 'palpable air of horror and panic, resulting in a sense of spreading, even contagious, insanity'.

These visitations culminated on the night of 17 May when the home of Herbert Bleeker was terrorized for as long as three hours by the entity. Neighbors claimed to hear unearthly noises coming from the house as well as all manner of shrieks and strange lights. Mr. Bleeker, a grocer, along with his wife and adult son, Charlie, were inside the home at the time, although neighbors were apparently too frightened to check on them. The next morning, all three Bleekers were found on their front lawn, looking, as one witness described, 'like they'd had their brains scrambled'. Later checked into an asylum in neighboring Dunfief, the Bleekers were described as unresponsive and delirious.

Twenty-four hours later, Charlie Bleeker began to respond to doctors. He described the visitation of the entity as an evening of freakish terrors. "It was like it was dissecting our brains from the inside out," Bleeker is heard to have said. "It was like we were radios, and it was tuning us, trying to make us feel the worst horrors imaginable! It was monstrous! Terrible! Like it didn't even know what we were but wasn't going to stop until it found out!"

Mr. Bleeker slipped back into incoherence after this short outburst, although he appears to be

responding moderately well to treatments. His parents, however, remain virtually comatose. Professor Liam Kirkwood of the Department of Paranormal Research at the University of Northern Heatherdown says such manifestations are on the increase. "Similar reports have emerged all across the country, and beyond. Most likely, this is the work of an alien species, researching humankind for its own unknowable reasons. We can only hope that whatever it is, its goals are not as frightening as it initially seems."

Inside View will follow these occurrences, providing further updates as circumstances dictate.

Slowly, James folded the tabloid clipping. He stuffed it and Lucy's letter back into the envelope. It couldn't be connected, he told himself. It was just a tabloid story. A lot of them were rather sensational, weren't they? Aliens and monsters and saints' faces being burned onto toast. Even so, the thought of the 'creature of smoke and ash' made him shudder. What if it was the Gatekeeper? What if it was already loosed on the earth and Merlin didn't even know it? Or worse, what if he knew it and was responsible for it? It simply couldn't be. It was too horrible. James determined he would have to find out, one way or another. He didn't know how he'd do it, but he would find a way. Having decided that, he felt a tiny bit better. He put the letter back into his bag, shouldered it, and ran the rest of the way to the North Tower.

"Hup, hup, students!" Kendrick Debellows cried heartily, pacing the length of the promenade overlooking the lake. "It's not even October yet! The water's still balmy. It's best if you jump in directly. Take it all on one shot and you'll be used to it in no time."

James stood between Ralph and Graham, his toes curled over the edge of the deck. The water below looked cold and murky. His face reflected back at him, his expression tense and worried.

"I don't know what's worse," Graham muttered through gritted teeth, "the idea of jumping into that water, or being seen wearing this idiotic outfit."

None of the students had packed swimwear, of course. Debellows, being rather insufferably persistent in his goals, had somehow located a closet of very old bathing suits once worn by an official Hogwarts water wrestling team. The one-piece suits extended to the elbows and knees and were striped in faded burgundy and grey. A Hogwarts crest was embroidered in the center of the chest.

"Who ever heard of 'water wrestling', anyway?" Ralph said.

"Oh, it was huge for a while, back in the old days," Graham replied. "The mermen had a team. You

wouldn't think they'd be all that strong, looking at them, but I guess they were really wiry."

"Students wore these to wrestle mermen?" James said, glancing down at his oversized swimsuit.

"Yeah, but the mermen cheated sometimes," Graham explained. "The whole event was scrapped when the merman captain was found with a Grindylow hidden under his cape. He was apparently using it to batten on to his opponent and pull them down."

On the grass bordering the edge of the lake, the second-year girls were supposedly running reflex drills, waving pommel-tipped sticks at each other. Most of them seemed to have abandoned the activity, choosing instead to stand in groups and watch the boys, smirking or looking bored. Debellows ignored them.

"This is very simple, students," Debellows called. "Jump in, swim out to the buoy, circle it, and swim back to the promenade. It may look far-off, but I assure you it is quite manageable. I did it myself six times just this morning. Brisk, it was! Now, does anyone else not know how to swim?"

The boys stared grimly, none daring to raise their hands. A few minutes earlier, Ralph's friend Trenton Bloch had admitted he had not yet learned how to swim. This had seemed, to James, a potentially inspired way to get out of the dip into the gloomy lake. Rather than excusing Trenton, however, Debellows had produced a set of inflatable rubber arm floaties. To Trenton's horror, Debellows had blown up the floaties himself, and then rammed them up the boy's arms. Trenton stood miserably at the far end of the promenade, arms akimbo. A couple of girls on the bank snickered at him.

"This is a test of will, my friends!" Debellows barked. "In the Harriers, not only did we have to learn to swim at distance, but we were trained for water combat, facing all sorts of aquatic beasts, from Snarracudas to Shrieking Eels. You will not face any combat on this endeavor, but we may introduce a Marshweed course later in the spring if Professor Longbottom is able to produce a sufficiently tame hybrid. For now, consider this a pleasure swim. And now, on one… two…" Debellows raised his wand, pointing it skyward. He grinned happily. "Three!" he shouted, firing a loud crack from his wand.

The boys scuffled, slithered, and variously lowered themselves into the water. Their splashes were accompanied by a chorus of groans and complaints.

"Are there still mermen in here?" Ralph hissed through his teeth, lowering himself into the cold, black water.

James nodded. "But my dad says it's the mermaids you have to worry about."

"That's wonderful," Ralph gasped, dropping up to his chin and trying not to splash. Gamely, he threw himself into a jerky breaststroke, heading for the orange buoy some fifty yards away. James followed him.

Ralph was a surprisingly good swimmer. By the time James rounded the buoy, finally getting somewhat accustomed to the water, Ralph was climbing the ladder onto the promenade. Debellows grabbed his hand and hoisted him up, nodding approvingly.

James completed his lap and grabbed the slick, seaweed-covered ladder. He'd swallowed an accidental gulp of the lake water and it rolled nauseously in his belly as he pulled himself up. He stumbled onto the deck and joined Ralph and Graham. All three stood shivering, streaming water from their oversized swimsuits.

"Let's double-time it, Bloch!" Debellows boomed, cupping his hands to his mouth. "Pretend you've got a Slagbelly chasing you. It could be true, in fact! I hear they've been sighted on the far side of the lake. And I understand they're attracted to splashes."

"Professor Debellows," a voice called. James turned, his teeth chattering. Professor McGonagall stood at the castle end of the promenade. She glanced quickly around but kept her face neutral. "The students are expected to be in the amphitheater in fifteen minutes. You do recall that today's class is to be concluded early."

"We are very nearly finished, Madam," Debellows called, clapping Ralph on the shoulder. "I daresay we will beat you to the assembly if you don't hurry." He turned, addressing the boys on the deck. "You heard the professor! Gather your shoes and form a line. I'll dry you as you pass by, then we'll have ourselves a nice trot around to the amphitheater. You can change afterwards."

Debellows produced his wand and pointed it at James, who was nearest. A blast of hot air erupted from the tip, pushing James backwards a step. A moment later, he was mostly dry. His hair stuck straight up from his head like a corona.

"We have to wear these stupid swimsuits to the assembly?" James asked incredulously.

"They're perfectly decent, Mr. Potter," Debellows replied dismissively. "Even rather stylish, if you ask me. We haven't a moment to lose, students. The amphitheater can be found around the East Rampart. Let's prove ourselves exemplary and precede the rest of the classes there, shall we? Now run, my friends! And Mr. Bloch! Will you be finishing your lap this term, or shall I send Mr. Deedle in to retrieve you?"

By the time James got to the outside amphitheater entrance, he was sweaty and out of breath. Most of the other classes were already gathering, their voices ringing in the natural acoustics of the space. James grimaced, seeing the hundreds of robed figures milling about. It was nearly impossible to remain inconspicuous in the oversized, striped swimsuits. James and Ralph huddled near the back, trying unsuccessfully to hide behind each other. Scorpius was the first to notice them. He walked past with a group of first-year Gryffindors, smirking. Cameron saw James and made to grin and wave. His grin turned slightly puzzled when he saw James' attire.

"I see none of the second-year *girls* are wearing swimsuits," Rose commented, slipping in next to James. "Defence Against the Dark Arts, I assume?"

James nodded. "It's OK though. Debellows says these are actually quite stylish. Come on, let's find a seat."

James' last time in the amphitheater had been the previous term, on the night of the first all-school debate. That had been a fairly unpleasant occasion, in which Tabitha Corsica had proclaimed from the stage that Harry Potter was a fraud and a liar. An all-out riot had been barely prevented by a well-timed bit of absurd fireworks, produced by Ted Lupin and the Gremlins. Now, by daylight, the amphitheater was quite cheerful. The huge stage was mostly bare; as James looked, a couple of older Ravenclaw boys climbed up from the orchestra pit. They bowed deeply on the edge of the stage, and then began to make faces and blow raspberries at the crowd. There was some scattered applause and hooting until Professor McGonagall shooed them back to their seats.

As James, Ralph, and Rose sidled into a row, Noah Metzker called from nearby. "Interesting choice of uniform, you two. The stripes say 'Azkaban', but the cut says 'exercise yard'."

"Har, har," James groused. "You'll be next, Metzker."

"Actually, we already did the lake run," Noah replied seriously. "Just wait until sixth year. Debellows shoots Stinging Hexes at you from the shore. It's supposed to teach you 'the mental discipline of overcoming pain'."

Damien nodded gravely. "All I had to overcome was a burning desire to clip him upside the ear."

James noticed that Petra wasn't sitting with the rest of the Gremlins. She sat at the end of the aisle, several rows down. She stared blankly at the stage.

Finally, Professor Tina Curry climbed the steps to the stage. She wore a sporty blue cloak over her robes. Her frizzy hair had been teased into a loose bun.

"Greetings, students," she called, raising her wand to her throat. Her amplified voice echoed around the amphitheater. The babble of voices subsided.

"Thank you for attending this rather unusual first class," Curry continued. "Since nearly all of you are taking Muggle Studies this term, following the new year-specific curriculum, I thought it'd be rather a treat for us all to begin the term's endeavor together. As most of you know, I am Tina Curry, Professor of Muggle Studies, and it is the goal of this class to teach us to understand the ways and means of the Muggle world. We do this for a variety of reasons, but primarily because, being witches and wizards, we have the benefit of knowing of the Muggle world, whereas they know nothing of us. It is, therefore, incumbent upon us to study the Muggle world, to understand it as well as possible, so that we may, whenever necessary, mingle in that world and work comfortably within it. Further, we must recall our shared humanity, valuing our differences without creating prejudices from them. Thus, as an exercise, this class encourages us to immerse ourselves in the Muggle world, utilizing some of the ingenious tools and methods that they have developed to compensate for their non-magical nature. Last term, many of you will recall that we played a Muggle sport called 'football', using only our feet and a simple, unenchanted ball. This term, we will attempt something on a far greater scale. This

endeavor will require the cooperation of every class. Every one of us will have a specific duty, and we will accomplish those duties using no spells, potions, or charms. This term, students, we will be producing a theatrical presentation of the famous wizard play, The Triumvirate."

A wave of chatter moved through the assembly. James couldn't tell if the general response was positive or negative.

"What's that about?" Ralph asked.

Rose whispered, "It's a story about a love triangle between a young witch princess named Astra and two wizards, Treus and Donovan. Donovan's older and richer, Treus is younger, a captain in the king's army. I saw it with my mum once when I was little. It's got a huge cast. Should be interesting."

Near the front of the assembly, Havelock Baumgarten, one of the Slytherin Beaters, stood up, raising his hand peremptorily. "Professor Curry, The Triumvirate is a classically magical production," he said in his cultured, rather smarmy voice. "By its nature, it is dependent on key magical elements. The dream sequence alone has the heroine flying, imagining phantom armies, and witnessing the predicted sinking of Treus' galleon in a hurricane. How can we possibly expect to remain faithful to the story if we insist on strictly Muggle methods?"

"A legitimate concern, Mr. Baumgarten," Curry replied. "However, I have just returned from a tour of some of the Muggle world's better theatre productions, and I must say that the sheer ingenuity and resourcefulness of those presentations amazed even me. In fact, you may be interested to learn that even Muggles refer to the 'magic' of theatre."

From the crowd, Victoire spoke up, "But how can Astra fly without levitation?"

"You'd be quite surprised what can be accomplished with ropes and pulleys, Miss Weasley," Curry said, smiling. "In fact, I think all of you will be quite impressed by the amount of mundane 'magic' that can be done simply with paint, costumes, props, lights, and a seemingly endless number of stage-hands. This is why I have asked the school to involve all classes in this rather extensive production. The sheer number of teams and skills required assures that every one of us will play a vital role in the production. I will serve as director, of course. The production will run one night only, in this very amphitheater, the last week of the school term. Your parents and families will all be invited to attend. It will be, I am quite sure, an evening that all of us will remember."

The assembly broke apart into hushed babbling again as everyone considered this rather unusual plan. Professor Curry cleared her throat.

"To this end," she said, raising her voice over the chattering crowd, "I have posted several sign-up parchments in the hall immediately adjacent to the amphitheater. Anyone who wishes may try out for a part. Auditions will be scheduled in class, and parts will be awarded by the end of next week. Those who do not wish to act onstage may sign up for the orchestra, the props department, the costume shop, light crew, stage crew, and et cetera. I am sure everyone will find an area they will enjoy working in. And now, allow me to be the first to welcome you all to the world of the theatre! The assembly will

conclude now, allowing you plenty of time to consider your options and sign up for whatever you wish. Thank you, students, and good evening."

As the assembly broke up and trickled toward the huge castle archway, Rose said, "You should sign up for a part, James. You're tall for your age. I bet you could play Treus."

James grimaced. "No way,"

"Why not?" Rose insisted. "Don't tell me you're afraid to get up on stage in front of everyone."

"No," James said, his face reddening a bit. "It's just silly. I mean, if we were doing The Last Assault of Keirkengard, I might sign up. At least in that story there's sword fights and explosions. I was thinking about signing up for the stage crew."

"Yeah," Ralph agreed. "I'm going to sign up for that or the props department. This could be kind of fun. I saw a play in London when I was a kid. It was wicked. I always thought it'd be neat to work behind the scenes."

"I'm putting my name down for Donovan," Noah proclaimed. "I've got that older, mysterious rogue look down already. I should be a shoo-in."

"It's too bad Ted's gone this year," Sabrina commented. "He'd love this. I wonder how he's doing with his Quidditch training."

Damien said, "We'll see him Hogsmeade weekend. We have a plan to meet him at the Triple Sticks."

"As long as he can get off work from Weasleys'," Noah interjected. "I hear George's been working him like a dog. Ted's not complaining though. He gets paid on commission, and he's pretty much a walking advertisement, isn't he?"

The crowd of students thronged near the archway as everyone milled around the sign-up parchments. Rose broke away, pressing toward the far end of the hallway. "I'm going to sign up for Astra," she called. "It's probably a long shot, but I can always fall back on costume shop if that doesn't work out."

Ralph also shouldered his way into the throng, heading for the props department sign-up parchment. James watched his friend go, and then scanned the nearby parchments. The crowd was finally thinning a bit as most of the students happily found their way to an early dinner. James glanced around, still hanging back. Satisfied that no one was watching, he slipped quickly over to the actors' sign-up parchments. He glanced over them, finding the parchment he was looking for. Grabbing the quill dangling from a bit of string, he signed his name to the parchment titled 'TREUS'.

It was completely silly, he assured himself. He'd never get the part. It was just a lark, a personal dare. Still, there was something exciting and giddy about the idea of playing the dashing male lead. He couldn't bring himself to admit it to Rose or Ralph. If by some remarkable fluke he were to get the role, he'd probably acknowledge that he'd secretly wanted to play it. Otherwise, no one would ever

know, and that was just fine. Before stepping away, James peered quickly at the other names on the parchment. He'd been halfcertain that Scorpius' name would be on the list. It wasn't, and he felt a bit silly for looking.

James sauntered as casually as possible over to the group still gathered around the stage crew sign-up parchment. Ralph was just finishing signing his name.

"I'm on stage crew and props department," Ralph said. "I hope I can be on both. What'd you sign up for, James?"

James finished signing his name on the stage crew parchment. He turned, keeping his face blank, and gestured with the quill before letting it drop back on its string.

Ralph nodded and smiled. "We'll work together, maybe. Trenton's signed up for stage crew too, and so is Beetlebrick. He's not so bad if you can stay off the topic of Quidditch. Did you see what Albus signed up for?"

James shook his head. In fact, he hadn't seen his brother the entire assembly. "We can ask him at dinner," James replied. "Come on."

It wasn't the first time James had sat at the Slytherin table. The previous year, he had frequently joined Ralph and Zane for meals under the green and silver banner. Only now, however, did James realize how comforting it had been to have his mischievous American friend, who'd been a Ravenclaw, alongside him in those instances. There were no seats near Albus, who persisted in being rather a popular character in his new house. James reluctantly sat with Ralph and Trenton Bloch near the end of the table.

James was distracted throughout the meal. He was annoyed at having to go to such lengths to attract the attention of his younger brother. It was supposed to be the other way around, wasn't it? Albus was simply being gullible. He believed that the Slytherins were drawn to him for his wit and personality, but James knew that they were just using him. Having a Potter amongst the Slytherins was a sort of moral victory for Tabitha Corsica and her stupid Fang and Talons club. James wanted to warn Albus that the Slytherins' friendship wasn't sincere, but he was also a little angry with him for being so easily taken in.

Albus finally stood up from the table along with the group of older Slytherins that always seemed to accompany him. James shoved his plate away and stood as well, meaning to head Albus off near the door. He wanted to warn him about Tabitha's broom, but that wasn't all he meant to say. Albus was

accepting this whole Slytherin assignment too easily, and James couldn't help feeling it was a betrayal of his family. He firmed his jaw as he turned to catch up to the departing Slytherins near the door.

"James," a voice rang out. James glanced back and stopped. Tabitha Corsica was approaching him from behind, smiling pleasantly. She had apparently broken away from Albus' constant entourage. James merely looked at her.

"I'm glad to see that you still feel comfortable dining at the Slytherin table," Tabitha said, affecting a warm smile. "I know there was some… unpleasantness last year. I am glad to see that it hasn't strained interhouse relations."

James shook his head, his anger rising. "Just stuff it, Corsica. There are no 'inter-house relations'. Just because Ralph is my friend, it doesn't mean I'm all smiles about what you and your lot stand for. I haven't forgotten the debate."

"Nor have I forgotten that you attempted to steal my broomstick before the tournament match last year," Tabitha said, batting her eyes coquettishly. "But I've decided to let bygones be bygones. I'd have thought you might feel a bit different, considering everything."

"Considering that Albus ended up going to the Slytherins just to spite Scorpius?" James spat. "He doesn't know what he's doing. And you're taking advantage of him."

Tabitha frowned slightly. "I'm sorry you feel that way, James. We happen to think that Albus fits in with us very nicely. He tells me that you witnessed his remarkable practice flight the other night, and I want you to know that I am quite glad you did. There was no trickery there. Albus is very talented. He will make a valuable addition to the Slytherin Quidditch team. And since you mention Scorpius Malfoy, I would think that the fact of his Sorting would prove to you precisely what I've been saying all along."

James glanced toward the door. Albus was leaving without so much as a look back. "What's Scorpius have to do with anything?" he asked.

"Well," Tabitha replied, arching her eyebrows, "Scorpius has either broken from the tradition of his father, choosing courage and valor over ambition, thus proving his worth as a Gryffindor. Or the Slytherins have changed, no longer to be the house of greed and corruption, as was the case in the day of Scorpius' father. Either way…," she smiled, waiting for James to give her his full attention, "it is proof that the Sorting Hat knows its business. Your brother is in Slytherin because that, James, is where he belongs. I truly hope you will not feel the continued need to interfere with that."

"He's my brother," James replied. "I'll interfere wherever I see fit."

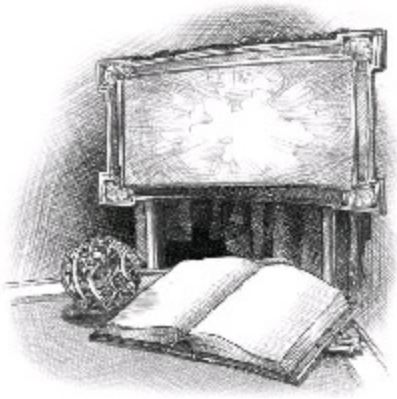
"I'm not threatening you, James," Tabitha said, the smile going out of her voice, "I'm doing you the favor of warning you. Your brother is special. It may well be that we Slytherins are the only house that could recognize that. Albus has a destiny. I tell you this as a friend: if anyone attempts to stand in the way of that destiny, even you, they do so at their own risk."

James studied Tabitha's face. She seemed remarkably sincere, and yet it was so hard to trust anything she said. "What do you think you know about Al's destiny?"

Tabitha smiled a little again. "That's for him to tell if he chooses. But I expect he hardly realizes it himself yet. My advice, James: watch and wait. And enjoy your brother's success. It's what he would do for you."

With that, Tabitha turned, her robes sweeping delicately, and left the Great Hall.

7. Amsera Certh



After dinner, James was accompanied by Ralph and Rose to the Gryffindor common room. On the way, he told them about his conversation with Tabitha and her unsettling proclamation of Albus' potential, but neither of them seemed particularly impressed.

"That's the way she always talks," Ralph said dismissively. "Even some of the Slytherins tend to view her as a bit of a drama queen."

"You mean anyone other than you and Trenton?" James asked, arching an eyebrow.

"They do seem to sincerely like Albus," Rose commented, stepping through the portrait hole. "Maybe it's all true. Maybe Albus is the boy of destiny. Apparently, that kind of thing runs in the family, just like dark hair and Quidditch skills."

"It's not funny," James said, but he couldn't help smiling a little.

"You should just come with me down to the Slytherin common room one of these nights," Ralph suggested. "See for yourself how Albus gets along with everybody. Honestly, he does seem to fit in pretty well. It'll put your mind at ease."

The three made their way across the crowded common room, joining Noah, Damien, and Sabrina on a pair of couches in a dark corner.

"We were just talking about you, James," Noah proclaimed, patting the couch cushion next to him. James flung himself onto the couch, happy to be among his friends.

"We've got an idea," Sabrina said wisely, tapping the side of her nose.

"Does it have anything to do with the Heracles window again?" Ralph asked, grinning. "That was a big hit even with the Slytherins. Filch still hasn't gotten it entirely back to rights. Heracles' face keeps reverting to Malfoy's overnight."

"It's all in the wrist," Damien said proudly, flexing his hand.

"No, this is even better," Noah replied, leaning forward on the couch and lowering his voice. "It's this Debellows disaster that's got everybody in a lather. Seems that people don't so much mind a little physical training; I mean the guy does have a point that battling the Dark Arts does sometimes require a little actual fighting. But this whole no-spells thing for the younger years is just over the top. And so it got us thinking…"

"This has happened before!" Sabrina said, smacking James on the shoulder.

James glanced around at the Gremlins. "I'm missing something," he admitted.

"Back in your dad's day," Damien replied, rolling his eyes. "The reign of Umbridge the Terrible. Don't tell me we know more about your dad's school exploits than you do."

"It wouldn't surprise me," James said, smiling crookedly. "It seems I haven't read any of the right books."

Rose made an annoyed noise. "Umbridge was the D.A.D.A. teacher," she explained. "She refused to teach them any usable defensive techniques because she was a Ministry tool, back when the Ministry was trying to squash any and all rumors about the return of 'He Who Must Not be Named'." She pronounced the euphemism with obvious sarcasm.

"I remember," James finally said, nodding. "But that's not what Debellows is about."

Sabrina cut James off. "It amounts to the same thing. So your plan is to solve it the same way."

"Oh no," James said, shaking his head. "No way. I'm not starting up another Dumbledore's Army. I just got done telling Cameron Creevey the other night that I'm not my father. I don't want people thinking I'm trying to relive all of his old adventures."

"Not to fear," Noah said, throwing his arm around James' shoulders. "No one will be thinking that. For one thing, we can't use that name."

"Agreed," Damien replied. "Too old-school. Maybe 'Merlin's Army'?"

Sabrina shook her head. "Too copycat. How about just the 'Real D.A.D.A.'?"

"Too long and too commercial," Damien replied.

"Look," Noah interrupted, "the name doesn't matter. The point is, you lot need to know this stuff. If you don't get it until you're as old and excellent as we are, it'll be too little, too late. You need to take matters into your own hands."

"But I can't teach any of it!" James exclaimed. "I barely know any of it myself!"

"Then I guess you need to find someone to teach it to you," Noah answered, shrugging.

"So why don't you three do it?" James shot back.

"Can't happen," Damien said matter-of-factly. "As great and inspiring as we may seem, we aren't teachers. You ever hear of muscle memory? It means that my hand knows how to cast an Expelliarmus spell, but my brain doesn't keep track of it anymore. It'd be like trying to explain how to walk. It's just second nature by now. No, you need a natural teacher; someone like your dad, back with the original Dumbledore's Army."

James turned to Ralph and Rose. "Shouldn't you two be speaking up, telling me what a ridiculous and irresponsible idea this is?"

"Actually," Rose said thoughtfully, "I think it makes a good bit of sense. I mean, it's true that we really aren't learning anything useful in Debellows' class. Especially the girls."

"And honestly," Ralph added, "I need all the help I can get with defensive magic. That's one area I've never really gotten a handle on."

"I'll say," James grudgingly agreed. "But still, this could get us into a load of trouble!"

"I don't see why," Rose reasoned. "There are lots of extracurricular classes and clubs. It's not like in our parents' day when Umbridge forbade anyone from practicing defensive spells. It could be a completely sanctioned school club. All we'd have to do is get the Headmaster's permission. You could ask, James. Merlin owes you one, after all."

James glanced at Rose. She shrugged.

"This leaves just one problem," Ralph commented. "Who will we get to teach?"

"You'd need somebody with a good, basic grasp of the defensive arts," Sabrina said. "Someone who's a natural leader and teacher, with some experience in actual battle."

An idea occurred to James. His eyes widened, and then he slumped slowly in his seat.

"What?" Rose asked, frowning.

"I think I just thought of the perfect teacher," James replied dolefully.

Ralph said, "So why is that a problem?"

"Because," James grinned crookedly, "I don't think he'll ever agree to do it."

Rose narrowed her eyes. After a moment, she smiled knowingly.

"Who?" Noah asked.

"Can't tell," James answered. "But if we can talk him into it, I'll let you know."

The Gremlins seemed a bit annoyed at James' secrecy but were generally content that their idea had been adopted. After a while, the group broke up, leaving only James, Ralph, and Rose in the dark corner.

"Do you think Cedric would ever do it?" Rose asked earnestly, keeping her voice low.

"Oh!" Ralph exclaimed, smacking his forehead. "I knew I should've known who you two were talking about."

"All we can do is ask him," James answered. "People say he had natural leadership skills. He was good enough to get into the Triwizard Tournament, and he made it through all the challenges, so he has plenty of experience."

"And from his perspective, it's all still fresh," Rose agreed.

Ralph asked, "But where can we find him? Last year, he just seemed to show up when he wanted to. We still don't really know where he hangs out."

James looked hard at Ralph, thinking. "Actually, I might have an idea about that."

"We should ask the Headmaster first," Rose said. "That way, we don't bother Cedric with it unless it's for sure. Let's all go together; tomorrow, after lunch. That'll give us a chance to figure out the best way to present the idea."

James nodded. "Sounds all right, I suppose."

"You don't think it's a good idea?" Rose asked, putting her head on one side.

"No, I guess it's a good idea," James admitted. "I just hate the idea of looking like I'm trying too hard. You know, doing everything like my dad did. Like I told Cameron, I'm not the one with the lightning bolt scar on my forehead."

Rose studied James. "Then why do you keep rubbing it?"

James dropped his hand, suddenly realizing that he was indeed touching his forehead. "What do you mean?"

"You've been rubbing at your forehead for the last few days," Rose replied. "You look like an advertisement for Haberdasher's Anti-Headache Headwear."

"It's true," Ralph added, nodding. "Maybe you should wear your glasses more if not wearing them is making your head hurt."

James was somewhat annoyed. "It's not my bloody glasses. I don't know what it is. I've just got an itch, that's all."

"You've got a constant itch on your forehead?" Ralph blinked.

"It's not 'constant'," James said. He glanced at Ralph and Rose. "Is it?"

Rose looked a bit concerned. "Maybe you should go see Madam Curio down in the hospital wing, James."

"That's the last thing I need," James said, chuckling. "It's nothing, really. I'd barely even noticed it. It does seem a little weird though."

"You've just been thinking about it all too much," Rose said reasonably. "No one is expecting you to be your father. Don't obsess over it."

James agreed, and he hoped Rose was right. As he said goodnight and climbed the stairs, he wondered about the phantom itch on his forehead. He really hadn't given it any thought until now, but it was a just a little bit strange, wasn't it, having a persistent itch in the place of his father's famous scar? No way would he be asking Madam Curio about it. It was bad enough, what with Cameron Creevey expecting him to shoot fireworks out of his bum on one hand, and Scorpius Malfoy accusing him of delusions of grandeur on the other. The last thing he needed was for a rumor to get started that James Potter was scratching at a phantom lightning bolt scar. Especially on top of the fact that he very well might be starting a club reminiscent of his dad's Dumbledore's Army.

As James was getting ready for bed, it occurred to him that, had he not had the conversation with Tabitha Corsica and gone away feeling worried and peeved, he might not have agreed so easily to the creation of the new D.A.D.A. club after all. Her words had left him feeling small and ridiculous, but the idea of starting a new Defence Club gave him a feeling of importance again. Was that reason enough to go through with it? He hoped it was a good idea, but really, he wasn't overly concerned about it. There were still two hurdles that needed to be overcome for the club to happen. The first was to get Merlin's approval, the second was to find Cedric and ask him to teach it. If either refused, then the club would never be. That seemed like good enough odds to James. Thinking that, he closed his eyes and drifted to sleep.

A grey, humid afternoon greeted James, Rose, and Ralph as they finished their Saturday lunch and headed out to wander the school grounds. It was one of those strange days at the beginning of autumn when it is too muggy to wear a jacket but too wet and breezy to go without. Rose huddled in a heavy jumper as James and Ralph threw rocks into the lake, admiring the splashes.

"I think we should just ask him straight up," Ralph said, heaving a stone sidearm. "Like you said last

night, Rose, there's no reason for him to say no."

"That's what I thought then," Rose replied. "But that was last night."

James glanced back at her. "A lot's changed since then, has it?"

"I stayed up late last night, reading," Rose said. "I wanted to get a head start on some of the books our Wizlit textbook suggested, like I told you in the library."

"You sure don't waste time," Ralph commented.

"I happen to like reading. Besides, not surprisingly, our Headmaster shows up occasionally in some of those books and I thought it'd be worth checking into his history a bit more before we talked to him."

Ralph lowered his throwing arm and looked up at the sky, squinting. "It's so weird. I was there when it happened, but I keep forgetting our Headmaster is the famous Merlin from all the old legends and myths. It's a little hard to wrap your mind around, isn't it?"

"I told you a lot of people find it a bit unsettling that Merlinus Ambrosius is Headmaster of Hogwarts," Rose said meaningfully. "And I found out why, a little bit. There's loads of stories about him in the old books of the kings. It's almost impossible to figure out what's made-up and what might be real, but even if only a tiny bit of it is true, it's pretty worrying."

"Like what?" James asked, prying a large rock out of the bank of the lake.

"Like kings used to hire him to curse armies. Not bad armies, necessarily; just any army that any king with enough treasure happened to dislike. More than once, when Merlin got to the army he was paid to curse, they would send out people to pay him more to go back and curse the king that'd originally hired him. And he did!"

"Sounds pretty practical, if you ask me," Ralph said, heaving a stone with both hands. It splashed nearby, wetting both James' and Ralph's shoes.

"This isn't funny, Ralph," Rose admonished. "He was a magical mercenary. A man like that wouldn't have any loyalty at all! Some of those armies he cursed… they got completely slaughtered, sometimes even before they got to the battle! There'd be floods, cyclones, even earthquakes where the ground would open up right beneath the army camp, swallowing them all whole."

"That can't be true," James commented. "I mean, Merlin's powerful, but nobody can do that."

"You're forgetting where Merlin gets his magic from," Rose replied as if she'd been prepared for such an argument. "According to the legends, Merlin can tap into the power of nature. We saw him doing that the night he took us to get his stuff. Nature is huge, and it was even huger back then, with less civilization. Who knows what a wizard like that would be able to do?"

Ralph brushed his hands off on his jeans. "I don't think 'huger' is a word."

"Don't you start correcting me," Rose said, looking back and forth between James and Ralph. "Why are neither of you taking this seriously?"

"Because like I said, we were there, Rose," Ralph replied. "We saw the man Reapparate from the Dark Ages. We worked with him in the days after. He helped us get rid of that Muggle reporter, who was going to blow the lid off the whole magical world. He was completely brilliant about it. He may have been a loose cannon in the past, but he's different now, isn't he? He's trying to be good, and he seems to be doing pretty well with it."

"Well," Rose said, "it isn't just that he was a loose cannon."

James plopped down on the grass next to her. "What? Did he put ketchup on his eggs? Did he draw mustaches on portraits?"

Rose looked at him, and then looked away. "According to some of the legends, he was supposed to be the bearer of an awful curse. His returning was to be an omen of the end of the world."

James felt a twinge of worry at that, but kept his voice even. "This is the part where it's hard to separate the fact from the loony made-up stuff, right?"

"Laugh if you want," Rose said, "but the prophecy shows up in a lot of places. Some call him the Harbinger of Doom. Other places just call him the Ambassador; of what, it never says. It gets pretty creepy," she admitted, shuddering. "Especially when you are reading it in the middle of the night."

"So far, he's just been the Ambassador of an extra ten points for Gryffindor and Slytherin because we helped him go get some magic box," Ralph said, shrugging. "Come on, it's almost two. He'll be expecting us."

"You coming, James?" Rose asked, climbing to her feet.

James glanced up. "What? Oh. Yeah, sure."

The three plodded through the foggy afternoon, heading for the courtyard. In the distance, thunder rumbled like a veiled threat and the wind began to switch. James was thinking rather nervously of the skeleton in the cave, Farrigan, the long lost associate of Merlin, and of Cousin Lucy's letter about the Gatekeeper. In the light of those things, Rose's tale of the legendary curse of Merlin sounded uncomfortably familar. James couldn't remember it exactly, but the skeleton had said something about a gate, and about things coming through, all because of Merlin's return. The Borleys had come through, at the very least. Merlin acknowledged that. But he claimed to have captured all of them except for the last one, the one that had followed James from that night at the Grotto Keep. Merlin said he'd trapped them all in his mysterious Darkbag. But the skeleton had warned of something else, something worse. Like the legends, it had also called Merlin the Ambassador, but Farrigan had identified the thing Merlin was supposedly representing: the Guardian, the Sentinel of Worlds, the

Gatekeeper. Lucy's letter had corroborated those legends, and now Rose's studies were confirming them as well. James shuddered as he followed Rose and Ralph into the castle.

They threaded their way through the weekend-empty corridors, passing darkened classrooms and halls. Finally, they reached the gargoyle which guarded the entrance to the spiral steps.

"You remember the password, Rose?" Ralph asked. "I couldn't even pronounce it, and you know how they are about writing things like that down."

Rose screwed up her face, thinking. Finally, she carefully pronounced, "In ois oisou."

The gargoyle moved with the sound of millstones grinding. It stepped aside, revealing the doorway.

"What's it mean?" James asked as he hopped onto the rising staircase.

Rose shook her head. "It's more of that ancient Welsh, I'd guess. Who knows what it means?"

They arrived in the hall outside the Headmaster's office and James reached to bang the door knocker.

"Wait," Rose said, grabbing James' arm. "Remember this morning? He told us to wait outside. He said he had another appointment before us."

James remembered. He carefully lowered the knocker and the three settled onto a long bench situated across from the Headmaster's door.

On the wall next to the door, amongst an arrangement of old paintings and portraits, was a face James recognized.

"Look," James nudged Ralph, pointing. "I remember him. Old Stonewall used him in Technomancy last year to teach us about magical portraits."

The portrait of Cornelius Yarrow, former Hogwarts bursar, peered at James over his spectacles. "I remember you too, young man. You had a rather unseemly number of questions regarding the subject. I hope you were satisfied."

"I was," James answered. "I especially liked the part about how only the original artist can destroy a magical portrait. It was really wicked when Stonewall melted his painting of that horrid clown."

"Your Professor Jackson did leave out one small detail," Yarrow sniffed, chafing at the memory. "There is one other person who can destroy a portrait, although it has never been known to happen."

"Seems like a pretty important detail to leave out," James frowned doubtfully. "Frankly, with all due respect, I'd trust him rather more on the subject than—"

Two things happened simultaneously, interrupting James. The door to the Headmaster's office unlatched and swung open and a stab of pain shot through James' forehead. He clapped a hand to his

head and squeezed his eyes shut, hissing in surprise.

"James?" Rose asked, concerned.

Almost as quickly as it had come, the pain vanished. James kept his hand to his forehead but risked opening his eyes. The first thing he saw was the view through the Headmaster's open doorway. Merlin was standing behind his desk, his face grave and his eyes piercing. He was staring very hard at James through the doorway, but the look on his face did not seem worried or alarmed. If anything, he looked intently watchful, perhaps even wary.

"Are you all right, James?" another voice asked. James lowered his hand and looked around. Petra Morganstern was standing in the hall, having just exited the Headmaster's office. She looked flushed, and her eyes were red, as if she'd been crying.

"I'm fine," James answered. "I… I should be wearing my glasses." He glanced at Rose and Ralph, warning them not to say anything.

"Oh," Petra said, looking away. "Well, I'll see you later. I've got… things to do."

James watched her walk away, wondering once again why Petra seemed so melancholy all of a sudden. And what in the world had Merlin said to her to upset her even more? James stood, looking back into the Headmaster's office again. Merlin was no longer staring at him with that hard, watchful look. He was turned to the side, studying a complicated brass device in his hands.

"Come in, my friends," Merlin called without looking.

As the three students entered the office, James couldn't help looking around in awe. Save for the old headmasters' portraits and the desk, the room was virtually unrecognizable as the same space McGonagall had occupied last term. A massive stuffed crocodile hung from the ceiling, looking like an exhibit in a museum. Bookshelves crowded the floor, crammed with enormous volumes in thick, leather covers. Alongside these were arcane tools and fixtures, none smaller than a cabinet, and all mind-bogglingly complex. Attached to the wall behind Merlin's desk was a glass case housing a thick black sack, hung on silver hooks. James recognized it as the mysterious Darkbag. The centerpiece of the room, however, was a very large, long mirror with a rectangular golden frame. The silvered glass of the mirror only half-reflected the room. Beyond the reflection, a swirling, leaden mist rolled and shifted. It was both beautiful and vaguely sickening. The mirror rested on a long brass easel in the center of the room, facing the Headmaster's desk.

"As promised," the Headmaster said, "the contents of my cache. Not all of it, of course, but enough to make my job rather easier."

There was only one chair facing the Headmaster's desk. James, Ralph, and Rose gathered around it, though none chose to sit on it. They continued to look around the room in awe.

"You've noticed my Mirror, Mr. Potter," Merlin said conversationally, still not looking up from the

strange device he was holding. "Very curious, yes? I see that you wish to ask me about it. Please feel free."

"What does it do?" James replied bluntly.

"The real question, Mr. Potter, is what doesn't it do?" Merlin said, finally setting the strange brass device on his desk and looking up. "It is the legendary Amsera Certh, the quintessential Magic Mirror of time immemorial. With the help of its Focusing Book, it can show you the past and the future. It can show you places you have been and replay ancient memories. It can even tell you, if you so wish, who is the fairest in the land. I fail to see the practical purpose of such information, but the Mirror's designer was a bit of an eccentric."

Merlin stood and moved slowly around his desk, approaching the Mirror. "Only two such mirrors were ever made. The sister of this one belonged to an associate of mine who, like all of my associates, is long since dead. That mirror, alas, is also lost to the mists of time."

Rose stared at the swirling, silvery mist in the Mirror. "Why were there only two ever made?"

Merlin reached the Mirror and pulled a braided cord. A thick black curtain dropped over the face of the Mirror. "Such pieces are very difficult to create, Miss Weasley. More importantly, the world can only contain so many very powerful magical devices. They weigh heavily on the balance of the cosmos. Too many at any given time can cause… wrinkles. Before my return, I lived at the tail of a much darker time when such wrinkles were commonplace. Fortunately, the age we now occupy is much better adjusted. Still, a few relics of the age of extraordinary magical devices remain." Merlin looked about with some pride. "Most of them are here in this very room."

Ralph swallowed and said, "Is it all, you know, safe?"

"Of course not, Mr. Deedle," Merlin replied easily, returning to his desk. "Any more than a wand is safe. But it is contained, and that is the important thing."

"Did you show Petra something in that mirror?" James asked suddenly, looking at the Headmaster's face.

Merlin didn't flinch. "I would say that is none of your concern, Mr. Potter, but I have lived in this age long enough to know that that would only heighten your curiosity. Yes, I did."

"Is that why she was so upset when she left? What'd you show her?"

"I showed her what she came asking to see," Merlin replied evenly, seating himself. "Nothing more and nothing less. If you wish to know further, you may consult Miss Morganstern directly, although she might find such an interrogation less than welcome. Now, what can I do for the three of you?" As he spoke, he reached across his desk and carefully closed a large book near the edge; the Mirror's 'Focusing Book', James assumed.

Rose maneuvered herself slightly in front of James. "We, uh, just came to ask about starting a club, Headmaster."

"What manner of club?" Merlin asked briskly.

"Well, a, er, practice… club," Rose stammered. "I mean, a club for practicing. Spells. Defensive techniques and things like that."

Ralph interrupted. "It's not that we don't like Professor Debellows or anything, either. He's really great. We just want to… practice."

"I understand that the good professor doesn't prefer to be called a professor," Merlin said, allowing a tiny smile.

"Er, that's true," Ralph agreed, his face reddening. "Kendrick, then."

"What sort of spells do you intend to practice? And who do you expect to be involved?"

"Anyone who wants to be involved," James answered. "And we'll just be practicing basic defensive techniques. Stuff we learned in our classes last year. We'll only be practicing on dummies and targets, never each other. Any teachers who want to supervise can come, of course. Although I expect that it'd be a little… er, boring."

James stopped, feeling that that last bit might have been too much. He was counting on the fact that no teacher would wish to volunteer for any extra time in class just to watch a bunch of students fling Expelliarmus spells at wooden dummies, but Merlin was quick enough to see through such a ruse. Knowing him, he might just assign a rotation of teacher chaperones, and Debellows would probably be first on the list.

Merlin opened his mouth to respond when, suddenly, the brass device on his desk shifted. Everyone in the room looked down at it. It was something like a hollow globe made of interconnected brass hoops, marking the globe's latitudes and longitudes. Inside, a complicated network of gears and ratchets operated a silver pointer. The pointer had begun to spin, making the globe roll slightly on the desk. After a moment, the pointer ceased spinning, ratcheted upwards a few notches, and went silent. Merlin stared at it.

"What is—" Ralph began, but Merlin interrupted him.

"You may proceed with your club, my young friends. Please send me a notification of when and where you plan to meet as well as a list of students who choose to be involved. After all, what kind of Headmaster would I be if I didn't keep abreast of such things?" Merlin had produced an official parchment with the Hogwarts crest emblazoned on the top. He scribbled a few notes on it and signed his name at the bottom with a flourish. "This should suffice in terms of official sanction. I wish you the best of success."

Ralph glanced at James, wide-eyed and smiling in relief.

"But Headmaster—" Rose began.

"If you will excuse me," Merlin said, rising, "it happens that I have some unexpected business to attend to. I'd hate to detain you, as I expect that you have preparations to make. Please do see yourselves to the staircase, and close the door on your way out, thank you."

"Thank you, sir," Ralph said, herding James and Rose toward the door. "You won't regret it!"

"Ralph!" Rose hissed.

The three nearly stumbled over each other as they crowded through the doorway.

"'You won't regret it'?" Rose whispered at Ralph, rounding on him in the hallway. "What kind of thing is that to say? You want him to be suspicious?"

Ralph grimaced. "I was nervous! So sue me! Come on, let's just get out of here before he changes his mind."

James was just pulling the door shut when he stopped suddenly, his eyes going wide. "The permission parchment!" he exclaimed, looking from Ralph to Rose. "Did either of you pick it up?"

"I didn't get it," Ralph said. "I thought Rose got it. She was closest."

"You shoved us out of there before I could get to it, you giant prat!"

"I'll get it," James said, turning back. The door hadn't yet latched shut. He pushed it slightly open, peering in.

"Headmaster?" he called. "We forgot the parchment you signed for us. Can I just…"

James frowned and pushed the door further open. The Headmaster's desk was vacant. The room appeared to be completely empty and was almost unnaturally still. Perhaps Merlin had gone somewhere by Floo Network. The brass device on his desk must have been an alarm or a reminder, telling him of a meeting he had to rush off to. James walked across the office and grabbed the parchment from the Headmaster's desk. As he turned back toward the door, a strange feeling came over him. With a sudden chill, he remembered the dart of pain that had shot through his forehead when he'd been waiting in the hall, right before he'd seen Merlin staring at him through the door. His heart quickening, James looked around and saw why the office seemed so unnaturally still. Across the rear wall of the office, from floor to ceiling, were the dozens of portraits of the former headmasters. Among them, of course, were the portraits of Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore, although as usual, Dumbledore's portrait was empty. Every portrait was perfectly still and silent.

Ralph and Rose had edged into the room, following James. Rose was staring at the portraits, her eyes

wide and nervous.

"Now that's just eerie," she said in a low voice.

"This is the only place on earth where a wall full of unmoving paintings is a bad omen," Ralph said. "But I am in total agreement with you, Rose. What's going on here? Where's Merlin?"

James crossed the room and stood in front of the portrait of Severus Snape. He had spoken to this portrait several times last term, and had been insulted by it on more than one occasion. Gingerly, he reached out and touched the portrait's face. He could feel the texture of the dried paint, feel the stroke that formed the man's hook nose. The face didn't so much as blink.

Rose gasped. "Look," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

James turned. The black curtain had once again been lifted from the Amsera Certh, but the surface of the Magic Mirror no longer showed merely swirling, leaden smoke. It showed a scene. The view was hazy and murky, as if seen through a very dirty, very imperfect window. James and Ralph joined Rose by the Mirror and peered past their reflections, trying to make sense of the cloudy scene.

The view looked through a stand of gnarled trees into a thick forest. It was very foggy, and the trees were dense enough to block most of the stormy daylight. There was a small clearing beyond the nearer trees, and in the center of the clearing was a sort of monument, caked with moss and vines. It was tall, thin, and leaning. As the scene moved in and out of murkiness, James could see that the monument was a statue of a man. The stone figure was rather handsome, dressed in a very old-fashioned suit. On the base of the statue were lines of engraving, but James couldn't make them out.

Rose suddenly covered her mouth, stifling a gasp. "I know what that place is!" she whispered. "But why would the Mirror be showing this?"

James had a terrible feeling he also knew the place. He'd heard about it but never seen it. Very few people ever had. On the base of the statue, just below the unreadable words, three large letters were engraved: T. M. R.

"T. M. R.," Ralph said wonderingly, then gasped. "Tom Marvolo Riddle! Is it really Voldemort's grave? Who'd bury a monster like him?"

"Nobody knows," Rose said quickly, still studying the ghostly scene. "There was an anonymous donation for the burial costs and the monument, specifying that he was to be buried as Tom Riddle and not Voldemort. No wizarding cemeteries would accept the remains, though. They finally buried him in a secret location in an unplottable forest. Hardly anyone even knows where it is."

In the Mirror, a figure moved. The three students gasped in unison. The figure hadn't walked into the scene, nor had it appeared. It was as if it had been there all along, but no one had noticed it. Only when it moved slightly was its presence made known. It wore a long, black, hooded robe which obscured its face, but there was something very unsettling about the fabric of the robe. It looked more

like a robe-shaped hole in space, filled with swirling, churning dark smoke. The ragged bottom of the robe did not quite reach ground, and yet no feet came out of it. James shuddered at the sight of the awful figure, thinking of the tabloid clipping Lucy had sent him. It had referred to the 'creature of smoke and ash'. Could this be that entity? Could this be the Gatekeeper? The figure raised an arm, revealing one thin, white hand. The hand seemed to beckon. A moment later, the statue of the youthful Voldemort shuddered. The proud expression went out of its face and the arms dangled like a puppet with its strings cut. And then, distantly, a voice spoke. It came out of the Mirror very faintly, barely heard over the sound of the wind and the creaking trees.

"Are you he whose echo has called to me?" the voice of the hooded entity asked. "He whose motives, more than anyone else's in this sphere, once aligned with mine? Reveal yourself."

The statue spoke, and its voice was very high and misty, nearly lost. "I am Tom Marvolo Riddle, also known as Lord Voldemort, dead of this world these many years, reclaimed to dust, passed on to the realm of torment."

"And yet," the robed entity said, "your imprint is strong enough to draw me. Your mortal remains are of no use to me; therefore, it must be your intention to tell me who bested you, that I may seek him for my purposes."

"He who bested me is no friend to you," the statue stated blandly, its voice nearly lost in the rising wind of that far-off place. "He was a boy then, but even then, he was stronger than could be deceived by your kind. He shall not assist you. But there are others…"

The vision in the glass was growing fainter. James reached out to touch the Mirror, to lean on it, but Rose stopped him.

"Even now, they await you," the dead voice of Tom Riddle said. "It is as you say: I am merely an echo, a memory, a fading ripple of a life gone. But they can bring you to another… one in whose heart beats my own essence. They are prepared for you… they await you here, this very night…"

At that, another figure pushed through the branches, moving out of the shadows of the trees. James couldn't make out the figure's face, but he could tell it was a man. Like the first figure, he was dressed in a hooded robe, but because of the man's position, James could see his face. He was pale and wary, but his eyes were resolute. The trees had begun to pitch and groan as the wind increased. The sounds of the place began to drown out the distant voices. James could barely make out the words of the pale man.

"We are prepared for you, o Master of the Void," he said, holding out his hand. "We have been awaiting you, as has been the whole world. Your time is near."

Suddenly, a third figure moved out of the woods, opposite the pale man. This figure was also dressed in black but was taller than the pale man. He didn't clamber out of the woods, as had the pale man, but moved with a sort of malevolent grace, stepping out into the clearing to face the shrouded form of the Gatekeeper. James was dismayed. Something about the proud, effortless gait of the taller figure made

him think of Merlin. The pale man did not seem surprised to see the third figure, although his wariness increased. He smiled thinly. The tall man and the Gatekeeper exchanged words, but a crack of thunder drowned them out. The wind grew to a steady howl, bearing the promise of a storm. Fat drops of rain began to fall, and the image started to blur. Suddenly, the pale man glanced around and then pointed, up and out, and James gasped. He'd pointed directly at James, as if seeing him through the Mirror glass. The man's pale face stared right into his eyes. The taller man turned as well, but if it was Merlin, James couldn't tell because of the shadow of his hood. Worst of all, the face of the statue had also turned. The stone representation of Tom Marvolo Riddle looked out of the Mirror at James, grinning an empty, carved grin, showing all its teeth.

James stumbled backwards, away from the Mirror, and bumped into the desk. He barely heard Ralph and Rose calling him, grabbing him, trying to pull him toward the door.

"Come on!" Rose called frantically. "We have to get out of here! They saw us! And it looks like they're coming! They're coming!"

James' eyes widened. Suddenly he turned, looking down at the desk behind him. The Focusing Book was open. There was only one notation on the page, written in Merlin's own hand: 'GRAVE OF THE SOUGHT HOST'. Without thinking, James used both hands to slam the book shut. Instantly, thunder boomed right outside the office window. Lightning flickered and a gust of cold wind roared into the room, lifting the curtains.

"Potter!" a voice rang out stridently. James spun on his heels. The portraits were all alive again. Most of them were looking around and blinking. Parchments swirled into the air as wind shifted wildly through the room, whickering through the curtains. The portrait of Snape glared at James, its eyes wide and very black. "What do you think you're doing? This is old magic! Magic like you have never imagined! You must leave this place. Now! Quickly!"

Ralph grabbed James and pulled, dragging him toward the door, which swung wide open of its own accord.

"Come on!" Rose called, running through the doorway and looking back. The door began to close again, cutting her off. James lunged, following Ralph. Snape's face was tense, dreadful, as James ran past, slipping through the doorway a moment before the heavy door slammed shut with a reverberating crash.

James and Ralph barreled into Rose, and all three collapsed onto the bench in the hall, hearts pounding and breathless. As one, they scrambled back up and ran toward the spiral staircase, clambered down to the corridor below. They kept running until they reached a wide balcony where they finally pounded to a clumsy halt, breathing hard and staring wild-eyed at each other.

"I hope," Ralph wheezed, bending over with his hands on his knees, "that one of us… at least remembered… the parchment this time."

After a night of squalls and thunderstorms, Sunday morning dawned like a blooming flower, kindling rose-colored sparkles in the drenched grass and trees. After breakfast, James, Ralph, and Rose picked their way across the wet lawns to Hagrid's hut, where they banged on the door. When the half-giant didn't answer, the three students followed the stone path around to the back. There, they found Hagrid and his bullmastiff, Trife, moving about in the curling vines and broad leaves of the pumpkin patch. Hagrid was humming cheerfully, wet up to his knees as he rolled and weeded his pumpkins.

"Good mornin', yeh lot! Fancy seein' the three of yeh out an' about this early on a weekend!"

"Good morning, Hagrid," Rose said, sweeping beads of water off the top of one of the huge pumpkins. Satisfied it was mostly dry, she sat on it. "We came out to talk to you about something."

"Blimey," Hagrid replied, "with yeh here, young Rose, it really is just like old times. Come now, let's go on inside. I was just tellin' Trife here that we ought to brew a mornin' tea, I was. We can talk all we want by the stove."

They made their way inside and Hagrid hung an enormous copper teapot on a hook over the fire. James, Rose, and Ralph clambered onto the oversized chairs around the table.

"Hagrid," Ralph began, glancing at Rose, "we saw something when we were up in the Headmaster's office yesterday. Rose thinks maybe we should tell someone about it because it could mean trouble."

James kicked the table leg idly and glared out the window. "Not everybody agrees with Rose, mind you."

"How can you say what we saw wasn't cause for alarm, James?" Rose demanded. "Even Ralph agrees that—"

"I'm not saying that it isn't cause for alarm," James interrupted, glaring back at Rose. "I just don't think it means the Headmaster is in on it like you keep wanting to believe."

"I don't want to believe it, but there's such a thing as evidence. There's seeing a man in the Mirror who looks and moves suspiciously like the Headmaster. You said so yourself! And he was consorting with… with known enemies and outright scary people. And at least one of them I don't think was even human! Not to mention the statue of You-Know-Who!"

"Whoa, now, wait just a minute, yeh three," Hagrid said, scowling and settling himself into his old easy chair. "I don't know what yeh saw, but let's not be dragging that old beastie out in the open. Yeh

just tell me what happened, why don'yeh."

Rose began to explain what had happened the day before, beginning with their interview with the Headmaster. As the story progressed, James and Ralph joined in, adding their own insights and corrections, so that by the time they were explaining how the portraits came back to life and the painting of Snape warned them to flee, all three of them were talking at once. Finally, they finished the account and fell silent, turning to view Hagrid's response.

The half-giant sat in his huge old chair by the fire, a distant, tense look on his face. He was looking in the direction of the three students but not directly at any of them. James had been confident that Hagrid would simply dismiss the tale as wild exaggeration. He'd tell them that what they'd seen in the Mirror had just been small-time shenanigans, engaged by men who refused to accept the fact that they'd long since lost the war. James knew from his father that while Hagrid may not always love the leaders of Hogwarts, he was loyal to the core. He'd defend Merlin, and assure them that there was absolutely nothing to worry about. That was partly why James had suggested they come out to the hut to talk to the big man. Now, as Hagrid sat in silence with that strange, tense look on his face, James wondered if it had been such a good idea after all.

Suddenly, the teapot began to shriek, causing everyone in the room to jump. Hagrid shook himself, and then reached to pull it from the hook. He carried it to the table and clanked it onto a trivet.

"Er," James said, prodding, "what do you think, Hagrid?"

Hagrid glanced at him, wiping his hands on a huge towel. "Well, it's a bit difficult, innit? Who's to say? Could've been anythin', I s'pose. The Headmaster, he's got some terrible powerful devices an' all. Ol' Professor Snape's portrait was pro'lly right tellin' yeh to stay well away."

"But Rose is saying she thinks it was Merlin that showed up by Voldemort's grave," James clarified, gesturing at his cousin. "Tell her she's daft if she thinks that! I mean, he's the Headmaster, Hagrid!"

China clattered as Hagrid gathered saucers and cups, returning to the table with his arms full. "Right yeh are, James. He is the Headmaster, an' all I can say's if he did show up in that Mirror, talkin' to whoever it was yeh saw, then he musta had plenty good reason to."

"But it couldn't have been him!" James insisted, looking to Ralph for support. "I mean, the thing in the swirling robe was obviously ten kinds of evil, and that bloke that showed up first had to have been an old Death Eater. I mean, it was Voldemort's ruddy grave site!"

"I'd appreciate it if yeh didn't say that name at my table, James," Hagrid said gently, setting a cup and saucer in front of him. His hands trembled slightly. "I know the battle's long over, but old habits die hard, yeh unnerstand."

Rose stirred in her seat. "Hagrid, do you think it could've been Merlin we saw?"

Hagrid poured steaming water into the cups before he answered. Finally, he settled himself onto one

of the chairs, producing a strained creak. He looked hard at Rose, and then stirred his tea with surprising delicacy.

"They say that the Headmaster's a good man with a garden," Hagrid said, as if changing the subject. "I don't do a whole lot of readin' myself o' course, but everyone knows that Merlin the Great was a keen one for nature and plants and such. I been hearin' stories about how he spoke to the birds an' the trees since I was a wee lad. So when he came on as Headmaster early this summer, I thought I'd go up an' make my acquaintance. I invited him to come down to the hut so I could show 'im my own little garden. Next day, sure enough, he takes me up on the offer. He traipses all over the garden, not sayin' the slightest thing. He just walks up and down, in and out, tapping that big staff o' his on my pumpkins and squashes and cabbages. Finally, he looks up, out toward the Forest. I looks too, 'cause there's something rising up out of the trees."

Hagrid still had the teaspoon in his huge hand. Gently, he set it next to his saucer. He looked at James, Ralph, and Rose one by one. "It was a Djinn. Like a raven, but bigger; black as night with glowing red eyes I could see from where I stood. I'd never actually seen one before, but I knew of 'em. Dark and mysterious creatures, they are; portents, according to legend. Very reclusive. I'd always been told they only come out at night, and if yeh see one on your path, it's a sure sign to turn right back 'round and run home, for the Djinn is s'posed to be a warning of horrible danger for those yeh love. Well, when I saw that black creature rise up out of the trees, I was about to call out to the Headmaster. But I knew he'd already seen it, an' he didn't seem any too worried about it. So I just watched. That black bird flew right over, wheeling once above the garden an' coming to land right on top of one of my pumpkins, right there next to the Headmaster. An' Merlin, he just watches it the whole time. The strangest thing was the way the two of 'em looked at each other. They didn't make any sounds, but it seemed to me plain as day that they was talking to each other somehow. After 'bout a minute, that Djinn looks over at me in that funny way that birds do, with their heads turned aside so one eye is pointing right at yeh. That bright red eye stared me right down, an' it was all I could do not to heave a rock at it like I was a scared kid."

Hagrid looked imploringly at the three students at his table. "I loves magical creatures," he declared. "Dragons to Skrewts. Yeh lot know that s'well as anyone! I teach Care of Magical Creatures, fer goodness sakes. But that's the way that 'orrible bird made me feel. That glowing red eye just looked at me, an' all I wanted was to put it out, make it so that it'd never look at anyone else ever again. It sent chills down me. Still does."

Hagrid stopped and finally took a sip of his tea. He cleared his throat and went on. "Finally, the thing took to flight again, flapping its great, greasy black wings. It flew back to the Forest and disappeared. The Headmaster watched it go, an' then he walked back over to me, still tapping his staff on the ground. He gets next to me an' turns back to the pumpkin patch, looking out over at the west corner. 'You've been having a dead spell in that corner,' he says to me. Well, it's true an' no denyin'. That west corner hasn't raised more'n thorns and thistle for five, six years. 'So I have,' I says to 'im. He looks me in the eye an' says, 'There's a fox who died with all her young, buried in her den under that corner of your garden, Mr. Hagrid. The dead spell arises from their bones, crying for a morning that'll never come. Dig them up, rebury them in the Forest, and sprinkle the earth with Sorrowshot powder.

Professor Heretofore can provide some, with my compliments. That will end your trouble.'"

Rose's mouth was turned down in a grimace of dismay. "Did you do it, Hagrid?"

Hagrid glanced up at her, raising his eyebrows. "Well, o' course I did! Found them bones and no mistake! Did just as the Headmaster said, right down to the Sorrowshot powder. An' you can see plain as day that it did the trick. That corner has my biggest Fiendscorn squash in it. A fine green Tigerstripe variety. You've seen it, o' course. But the point is…"

Hagrid stopped again and fiddled nervously with his teacup and saucer. He took another quick sip, as if to silence himself.

"What, Hagrid?" Ralph asked, exasperated. "What's the point?"

Hagrid looked at him, as if struggling with whether to speak. Finally, he leaned slightly over the table and said in a low voice, "The point is it seems pretty plain to me that the Djinn told the Headmaster about that dead fox an' 'er young! The point is, not only are all the old stories true about Merlin the Great talkin' to the trees and the birds, he even talks to the mystical creature-birds of the night! If that great black bird had shown its red eyes in my presence any other time, I'd have turned on my heel an' run! But Merlin, he watches the thing fly over almost as if he called it, almost as if he knows it by its ruddy first name!"

James listened with his mouth pressed into a thin line. Finally, he straightened in his chair and said as plainly as he dared, "That doesn't mean he's evil."

Hagrid blinked at him. "Well, o' course not! Who said he was evil?"

James was perplexed. "But you just said—"

"Now hold on, James, an' the rest of yeh. I want to be clear," Hagrid said seriously. "All I'm saying is that the Headmaster comes from a much different time, a time that would probably scare the hair off most of us. He lived in that time and worked in it. It's what he knows. Things that we would call evil an' bad in this day and age, well… let's just say things weren't so black and white in the time he comes from. That isn't to say that the Headmaster himself is bad. I've got every reason to trust him, and trust him I do! He's just a wee bit… well, wild. If you take my meaning. That's all."

"But Hagrid," Rose exclaimed, "in the Mirror! We saw him with that… that awful thing in the swirling black cloak!"

"If that was the Headmaster," Hagrid replied stubbornly, "then he had a very good reason to be there. Yeh said yourself, Rose, that none of yeh could hear what the man said. Maybe he was confronting them. Maybe he was… well, I dunno, but the point is yeh dunno neither."

"That's what I've been saying all along," James said petulantly, glaring across the table at Rose.

"Fact is," Hagrid went on, "none of yeh know the slightest bit about what yeh was seeing from start to end. Yeh said Merlin told yeh that the Mirror showed the past and the future as well as far-off places, didn'ya? Maybe what yeh were seeing wasn't even from the here'n now. Did yeh think o' that?"

"Actually," Ralph said thoughtfully, "no, we hadn't."

"But the gravesite!" Rose insisted. "That wasn't from a long time ago! Volde—er, He Who Must Not Be Named hasn't been dead all that long! But his grave was all covered with moss and vines, so it couldn't have been from the past…"

"Let it go, Rose," Ralph shrugged. "You might be right, but what would we do about it anyway? All we can do is hope Merlin's as good as his word, like Hagrid says. If he is, we don't have anything to worry about. If he's not… well, what are we going to do against a bloke that can make the earth open up and swallow whole armies?"

Rose fumed but didn't respond.

A short while later, the trio finished their teas and bid Hagrid goodbye. As they left, James peered over into the west corner of the garden. Sure enough, a very large orange- and purple-striped squash rested there on its bed of leaves, still glistening with last night's rain.

"I don't care what anyone says," Rose said gravely as they skirted the Whomping Willow, "I don't trust him. He's not what he says he is."

"As much as I don't agree with Rose," Ralph answered, "this whole thing does make our new Defence Club seem all the more important."

"How so?" James asked.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it? If what we saw in the Mirror was true and was from the present day, then it means some really bad stuff might be coming. We might actually have an enemy to fight. I, for one, want to be ready for that."

"Ralph," Rose said in a different voice, "if I didn't find you generally thick as a brick, I'd be impressed by that."

Ralph blushed a little. "Thanks, I guess."

As they rounded a stand of bushes on the far side of the Whomping Willow, they ran into Noah, Damien, and Gennifer Tellus, the Ravenclaw Gremlin. The three were crouched just out of range of the branches, studying the gnarled tree trunk. The branches of the Willow shifted and twitched, sensing their presence but not quite able to reach them.

"Hey," Ralph called as they approached the hunkered Gremlins, "we got permission to start the new Defence Club—"

"Shh!" Noah hissed, raising a hand. "Hold on a minute."

James, Rose, and Ralph crept up behind the three Gremlins, who were rasping at each other tensely.

"A little lower," Damien hissed. "It's the big one that looks like an Adam's apple on a really skinny bloke."

Noah shook his head. "We tried that one time before last! I keep telling you it's on the other side, facing away from the castle. I remember from last year, with Ted."

Gennifer held a long stick. Biting her tongue in concentration, she held it out, reaching toward the tree trunk with the stick's tip. The tree leaned slightly and, almost lazily, whiplashed a branch at the stick. Gennifer exclaimed painfully as the stick was wrenched from her hand. It spun off into the thickets and the Willow relaxed again, almost smugly.

"I told you to hold it lower!" Noah exclaimed, stepping away from the tree and straightening.

"Look, you want to give it a go?" Gennifer replied, looking back over her shoulder. "Be my guest. But you'll need to go find yourself yet another stick."

"I can't help if you have longer arms than me," Noah proclaimed. "It's not my fault you've got the reach of a weregorilla."

"I've got another stick," Damien said patiently. "Here, give it another go, Gen. We'll hit it eventually."

James watched as Gennifer reached carefully toward the tree trunk again. The Willow swung its branches, feeling for the stick but not quite reaching it this time. James asked Noah, "What's this all about?"

"Secret passage, possibly," Noah answered, wiping moisture and grass clippings from his hands. "We've been coming out and testing it every year since I first came. It was Ted's idea. Hit the right knot on the trunk and the tree goes tame enough to get inside."

Rose's eyes brightened. "It leads to a secret passageway? But I thought all the old secret passages had been sealed off?"

"Well, there's sealed off and there's sealed off," Noah replied. "Thing is, Hogwarts being as magical as it is, the passages have ways of opening back up on their own after a while. Either that or new ones get discovered nearby. Petra discovered the Lokimagus passage just down the hall from the statue of the OneEyed Witch, and that statue was supposed to lead to a secret passage back in your parents' day."

"I remember Mum talking about that one," Rose agreed. "She said it went down to Hogsmeade. I was hoping that one still worked. I wanted to see Hogsmeade myself this year even though first-years aren't allowed to go on Hogsmeade weekends."

"Ahh, Hogsmeade," Noah sighed. "Making miscreants out of model students for as long as I can remember. Ted works down there now, at Weasleys'. We plan on getting him to buy us Butterbeers at the Triple Sticks when we go. All of us except Petra, of course."

"What's going on with Petra?" James asked suddenly.

Noah glanced at James. "Oh, nothing major. She just doesn't want to go because she and Ted used to be a bit of an item. Apparently, it all came to an end when Ted started seeing Victoire. They kept it secret most of the summer, but now the whole world knows about it. Somebody blabbed about it back at King's Cross."

"I didn't blab!" James exclaimed before he could stop himself. "Ted told me to tell! He wanted to get the word out but didn't want to make a big thing of it!"

"That was you?" Gennifer said, peering back at James over her shoulder.

James rolled his eyes. "So that's what Petra's all upset about?"

"She hasn't said so," Noah said, sighing. "Who can tell? She and Ted were never all that serious, if you ask me. I admit I expected her to end it first, though. Ted's just a bit too wild for a girl like Petra. She needs a different kind of man."

"A man whose initials are N. M., you think?" Damien called, grinning.

James felt his face heat. It bothered him that he might have inadvertently caused Petra's melancholy by revealing Ted and Victoire's relationship, even if Ted had asked him to do it. For some reason, it also bothered him that Noah might be interested in taking Ted's place. Nonchalantly, James asked Noah, "What kind of man does a girl like Petra want?"

Noah shrugged. "Well, Petra's smart. Smarter than most people know. She's going places. She needs a bloke who can hunker down and take life seriously with her. Ted, he's great and we all love him, but he's not the take-life-seriously type."

Rose interjected, "I heard Petra might get the part of Astra in the play. She'd be great for the role with her long dark hair and blue eyes."

Noah nodded. "If she can get her head around it. It's down to her and Josephina Bartlett, and Josephina really wants that part."

"It's just the thing Petra needs to get her mind off of Ted Lupin," Rose said emphatically. "She's prettier than Josephina any day of the week. I'll help her prepare for the role if I can. She has one more audition, doesn't she?"

"Later this week," Noah agreed. "I hope she gets it. I'm still hoping to land the part of Donovan."

"And Donovan and Astra get to dance," Damien sang mistily.

"That's nothing," Noah replied. "Astra and Treus kiss at the end of the play, and the script calls it 'the kiss of true and everlasting love'."

"They won't really kiss," Rose said, shaking her head. "In plays, they just press their cheeks together with their heads turned. The audience just thinks they're kissing."

"Close enough for me," Noah muttered. "How we doing with that secret knot, Tellus?"

"Don't hassle the maestro while she's working…," Damien said, still hunkered down next to Gennifer. The Willow was growing restless. Its trunk creaked ominously as it leaned, trying to lower its branches to walloping distance. Gennifer's stick weaved nervously near the leaning trunk.

Ralph was looking apprehensively at the big, swaying tree. "So you've already been down in the secret passage beneath the Whomping Willow? Where does it go?"

"As of last year, nowhere," Noah admitted. "It was all blocked off by a cave-in after a little way. That's why it never occurred to us to mark the secret knot. Still, it always seems like it'd have been a good idea when we come back the next year."

"We can't mark the knot," Gennifer said through gritted teeth. "Otherwise, everyone would be able to use it. We have to just… remember it… there!"

Gennifer jabbed the stick at the trunk, hitting a large knot near one of the tree's twisted roots. The tree suddenly straightened and went still.

"Come on!" Noah cried, bolting toward the tree. "We don't have long!"

James threw a look at Rose, then Ralph. Simultaneously, all three turned and ran toward the tree, following the three Gremlins. Gennifer was the first to reach the trunk. She ducked and threw herself forward, disappearing into a deep crack between two enormous roots. Damien and Noah followed. James hoped there was room inside for six since he was the last in. As Ralph scrambled into the narrow space, James glanced up. He'd never been this close to the Whomping Willow before and it looked huge and deadly as it loomed over him. As he watched, its branches began to move again. The trunk groaned ominously as it reanimated, angry and looking for something to whomp. James ducked and threw himself into the crack between the roots just as a branch swung past him, buffeting him with its passage.

"Wow," Gennifer said, clambering up, "six people with one knot push! I'd say that's a new record. Everybody all right?"

"I'll be fine when James gets off my back," Rose complained, grunting.

"Sorry, Rose. I didn't have time to look where I was landing."

Noah lit his wand and held it up. The space was low, ceilinged with the massive roots of the Whomping Willow. A stone-walled passage led down into darkness. The Gremlins began to descend it, followed closely by James, Rose, and Ralph. After about thirty paces, the group came to a halt. In the lead, Noah held his wand higher, whistling through his teeth.

"Eureka," Damien said excitedly.

"What?" Rose exclaimed, standing on her toes to see over James' shoulder. "I can't see! What is it?"

"Hogwarts finds a way," Gennifer replied. "It looks like there was a flood down here last spring. Washed a bunch of the dirt and gravel away. Look, there's room to squeeze through if you don't mind getting dirty."

"Excellent!" Noah proclaimed, his voice echoing from further ahead. There was a distant splash. "The passage beyond is completely intact! There's a little water to slosh through, and some seriously busy spiders, but the wandlight scares them away. I'd guess this goes straight on through from here."

"Are we going now?" Ralph asked. "I didn't really come prepared for any, er, journeys."

"Don't get anxious, Ralphinator," Noah answered, scrambling back around the former cave-in. "We'll go the rest of the way later. It's just good to know the passageway's back open again."

"And we're the first to find it," Gennifer added.

"So don't you lot tell anyone," Damien finished, stabbing a finger in the air and looking severely at James, Rose, and Ralph. "Especially you, Mr. Slytherin."

"Easy, Damascus," Noah said. "Ralph's loyal to the Gremlin cause. Come on, let's get back out of here."

"So where does the passage go to?" Rose asked as they retraced their steps.

"Our best guess is that it goes to Hogsmeade," Gennifer answered. "So you might get your wish about sneaking in a visit this year."

"The passage goes to Hogsmeade?" Ralph replied, a bit irked about Damien's lack of confidence. "Where does it come up? Couldn't somebody just trace it back to Hogwarts?"

"Worried that your dad missed another weak spot in the school's 'security perimeter'?" Damien asked, smiling crookedly. "Don't worry. Old Daddy Dolohov's defensive perimeter is safe. Nobody will be coming back from the other side. Except us, hopefully."

"The passage doesn't go to Hogsmeade directly, Ralph," Noah said.

They reached the bunker beneath the Whomping Willow. Carefully, Gennifer reached out and found the secret knot. The tree went still and she scrambled out.

"So where does it go to, then?" James asked as the group climbed quickly out of the secret opening.

"Our best guess is it goes to a delightful place called the 'Shrieking Shack'," Damien said, stopping outside the perimeter of the tree. "Nobody ever goes there."

"I can see why," Ralph nodded. "Does it, you know, shriek?"

"No, it's just a name, Ralph," Gennifer said, clapping the big boy on the shoulder. "It hasn't shrieked in decades. Although apparently it used to make quite a fuss, didn't it? Supposedly, the whole place shook."

Ralph looked back at James and Rose. "Are they making fun of me?"

"Yeah, Ralph," James nodded. "But it's all out of love. Don't sweat it."

Ralph accepted that and the three began to follow the Gremlins back across the wet grass. As they reached the castle, he asked, "So the Shrieking Shack didn't really used to shriek?"

James shook his head. "I didn't say that, Ralph… I just said they were making a little fun of you. It's best if you don't ask any more about it."

Rose concurred. "Really, Ralph. Trust us."

Ralph opened his mouth, considered it, and then closed it again. He sighed and the three students climbed the steps into the castle, following the smells of lunch.

8. The Audition

The next day's Defence Against the Dark Arts class was slightly more bearable than previous classes, if only because they had a guest teacher's assistant. The assistant was possibly even more of a celebrity than Debellows himself, since he was not only the new leader of the Harriers special forces squadron, but was also a former Bulgarian World Cup Quidditch player. Viktor Krum strode purposely into the gym as Debellows introduced him, and the assembly of students applauded roundly. James knew Krum very vaguely, having met him once or twice years earlier. Viktor Krum had, of course, competed in the Triwizard Tournament alongside James' dad, Aunt Fleur and Cedric. During that time, he'd also had a short, romantic relationship with Aunt Hermione as well, to the extent that on the few occasions that Viktor had been in the same room with the Weasley family, Aunt Hermione had tended to look in the other direction quite a lot and Uncle Ron had puffed his chest out and adopted an attitude of noisy surliness.

Viktor spoke to the class in his irrepressible accent, telling them how he'd trained alongside Kendrick Debellows in his early years in the Harriers, and assuring everyone that he wouldn't be where he was today if not for the man's leadership and example. James was almost immediately bored. He liked Viktor quite a lot, but he disliked Debellows enough that the sight of the man absorbing his protégé's praise made James a bit ill. The upshot was that there were no troops through the Gauntlet that day, although Debellows challenged Krum to a 'manly contest' to see which one of them could make it through first. Viktor had turned down the challenge, and James liked to believe it was because the younger man simply hadn't wanted to shame his mentor.

As the class wore on, James saw that Ralph, who was only slightly more artistic than James, was doodling an idea for the new Defence Club sign-up sheet.

As they filed out of the gym and made their way to History of Magic, James said to Ralph, "You know, we really shouldn't be putting those up until we know we have a teacher."

"That's your job," Ralph shrugged. "I have to do my part. Besides, you'll talk Cedric into it. You're good at that."

"Yeah, well, I haven't talked him into it yet."

"You'd best get on it, then," Rose said, meeting them at an intersection. "The first meeting is tomorrow night."

James nearly dropped his book. "Tomorrow? Since when?"

"Since I started spreading the word around the Great Hall at breakfast," Rose replied simply. "I only meant to tell Henrietta Littleby and Fiona Fourcompass, but you know how Fiona is. The whole Ravenclaw table was talking about it by the time I left. There's a lot of excitement about it. Nobody likes the way Debellows is running D.A.D.A. even though it was sort of sweet to see Viktor in the halls this morning."

"But we don't even know where we're meeting!" James exclaimed. "I thought we talked about starting things up at the end of next week?"

"That was before we talked to the Headmaster and saw what we saw in his Mirror. Ralph's right. Things seem a bit more urgent now. Besides," Rose sniffed, stopping at the door to History of Magic, "we agreed I was in charge of scheduling."

"Yeah, I suppose, but… the entire Ravenclaw Table?"

Rose nodded. "And Louis is spreading the word with the Hufflepuffs."

"Louis!" James cried, raising his voice again. "You got Louis involved?"

"He overheard me, so I thought I'd put him to work. What's the matter? I thought you said that anyone who wanted could be involved?"

"Yeah, well…," James said, lowering his voice, "anybody we wanted to know about it."

"I don't think it works that way," Ralph replied. "Besides, word's all over the school by now."

James exhaled in frustration, but it was too late to do anything about it. He'd have to go and find Cedric tonight if he could. Thinking that, he turned and shouldered his way into the crowded classroom where Professor Binns was already burbling away, his back to the students as he made ghostly notes on the illegible chalkboard.

James finally had the opportunity he was waiting for that night after dinner. Ralph said goodnight at the stairs and Rose was in the library doing some homework. Once Ralph had descended into the cellars, James turned away from the stairway and walked along the main hall toward the portico. He felt rather strongly that he had to do this by himself. As he turned into the corridor that bore the trophy case, he slowed, looking around. There was no one about and the halls were quite silent as most of the students retired to their common rooms for the evening.

James walked lightly along the display cases, passing the photos of ancient House Quidditch teams and displays of old game balls, plaques, and trophies. He paused for a moment in front of a Quidditch

tournament trophy engraved with a list of names. It was rather old and tarnished, but the name near the bottom was still perfectly legible. 'James Potter – Chaser', it read in flowing script. Here was the name of the grandfather James had never known. He felt suddenly very sad because it reminded him that he had no grandfathers at all anymore. The plaque was rather dusty, probably forgotten by most everyone that moved daily through these halls. James had a strong urge to reach into the case and touch the plaque, as if to make sure it was real. It was like an anchor that connected him to a person and a time he'd never known. James glanced around the corridor, assuring himself no one was looking, and then stepped toward the case. The glass door squeaked slightly as he opened it. He reached in and ran a finger across the name engraved near the bottom, drawing a faint line in the dust. He could barely feel the etching of the letters.

Suddenly, for no apparent reason, James thought of the words his father had said to him on the night of Granddad's funeral: Granddad is really the third father I've lost… I'm back to where I started. This name on the trophy was where everything started. This trophy is from those last few years before everything changed, James thought, before Grandma and Granddad were killed by Voldemort; before Dad's godfather, Sirius, was lost in the Hall of Mysteries; before old Dumbledore was struck down on one of the roofs of this very castle; this was back before any of that had happened, when everybody was happy and nobody had had to die yet. If only… if only…

"I remember seeing your dad standing there in front of that very plaque," a voice said quietly.

James wasn't surprised. He didn't turn around as he said, "I came down here to look for you. I had a feeling this is where you came when you didn't know where else to go."

"This is the first place I remember being after I died," the ghostly voice of Cedric Diggory said. "There was a long, long time of nothing, although it sometimes felt only like minutes. Finally, here I was, looking down at my own picture by the Triwizard Cup. I spent a lot of time doing that. It was… comforting, in a way. I can't see myself in mirrors, you know. It's just one of the peculiarities of being a ghost."

James closed the trophy case and turned to Cedric. "You saw my dad standing here, looking at Granddad's name on the plaque?"

Cedric smiled at the memory. "It wasn't just him. It was all three of them. Ron, Hermione, and Harry. It was their first year. I didn't know them then, but I knew who your father was. Everybody did."

James looked back at the plaque again. It helped to know that his dad had also looked at that name and felt some of the same things he was feeling. He sighed.

"The past is a steel trap," Cedric said. "Trust me on that one, James."

James glanced up, as if in surprise.

"What?" Cedric said. "It wasn't that profound, was it?"

James shook his head. "No. I mean, yeah, I guess, but that's not what I was thinking. I just had the strongest, weirdest feeling that this has happened before. And all of a sudden, I thought of Ralph's story."

Cedric looked puzzled. James went on, waving a hand. "It's this story that we learned about in Wizlit. Professor Revalvier says that all great magical stories were meant to be told by word of mouth because written words cage them and make them tame. Magical stories are meant to stay alive. They change with each retelling because they pick up the spirit of the teller. I don't know why; I just thought of the last line from the story Ralph told us in class. It's the only line I can ever get exactly right when I try to write it down."

"What is it?" Cedric asked.

James was thoughtful. "'Then I am the King of the Cats,'" he said, as if tasting the words.

Cedric's ghost was silent. After a moment, he asked, "So what does it mean?"

"That's just it," James said, shaking his head. "It doesn't seem to mean anything unless I'm not thinking about it. Then, all of a sudden, it'll pop into my head, just like it did now, and it'll seem really important. I just can't put my finger on it. It's like seeing something out of the corner of your eye, something that vanishes as soon as you look right at it."

"Well, I guess if it really is important, it'll come to you when you need it," Cedric said, shrugging. "You said you came down here looking for me?"

"Oh," James replied, shaking himself. "Yeah. Er…" He sighed, and then looked the ghost right in his semi-transparent eye. "We need your help, Ced. I don't know how else to put it. We're putting together this club, Ralph and Rose and me. Actually, it was Noah, Sabrina, and Damien's idea, but we're the ones that went to Merlin and got permission and everything. Honestly, we're not even the first people to do it. My dad had a club like this way back in his day, although it was after you, you know, er… anyway, we need to learn how to do defensive spells and techniques and our new teacher this year refuses to teach us anything except how to pull a hamstring. We've got permission to officially start the club, and by now, it seems like the whole school already knows about it. Our first meeting's tomorrow, but we don't even have a teacher. That's why I came to find you. When we first talked about it, you were the first person that Ralph, Rose, and I thought of to teach us defensive magic."

"You can't be serious," Cedric said, smiling a little crookedly. "I'm a ghost, if you haven't noticed. Not only do I not have a working wand anymore, technically, I don't even have fingers. I couldn't Stun a dust-bunny. I have a hard enough time magicking the lanterns out when I do my 'Specter of Silence' routine. And you think I can teach defensive magical technique?"

"Well, yeah!" James said, warming to the subject. "I mean, you were a great wizard, even while you were still in school! Everybody says so! Even Viktor Krum talks about how you outwitted the dragon and took on the merpeople. You were a natural! Besides, you have actual battle experience, having been all through the Triwizard Tournament. And you learned under Dumbledore, who everybody says

was the golden age of Hogwarts. Come on, Cedric! It's perfect!"

"I don't think so, James," Cedric said, his smile fading. "It's great that you thought to ask me and all, but…"

"Look, Cedric, this isn't just for us," James said, stepping a bit closer to the ghost. "You said you didn't think there was a place for you here anymore. All your old friends and classmates have moved on. But there are a whole bunch of us who really do need you, here and now. My dad says you were totally excellent with your spellwork and technique, and everybody knows you were a natural leader. I know you still remember it all because ghosts don't experience time the same way the living do. Come on, what do you say?"

Cedric's ghost was flitting backwards, his face downcast as he shook his head. "I can't, James. Part of me would really like to do it, but I can't. You wouldn't understand."

"Look, Ced, just try it for a week or two. It'll be great! Everyone will love you and I just know you'll be able to teach us loads of stuff. Besides…"

James faltered, not sure if he should go on. Cedric stopped and looked back at him. James took a deep breath and continued.

"Remember the end of last year, that night when we talked in the Gryffindor common room? You told me there was a sense of Voldemort still in the halls here, even though he was dead. Well, Rose and Ralph and me, we saw something. And… I've been sensing things. Something's up, and it has something to do with the old Death Eaters, and Voldemort's grave, and some really scary creature in a cloak that looks like it's made out of swirling smoke and ash. Rose even thinks that the Headmaster is involved, although I don't agree. What I'm trying to say is that there could be a battle coming. Debellows isn't teaching us anything worth using in a real magical fight. We just want to be prepared. We want to be ready. You're from the time when Voldemort was still alive. You know how best to fight these people. You're perfect, and we need you."

Cedric looked at James for a long, tense moment. He seemed to be struggling with himself. Finally, he lowered his brow and looked away. "You're right about one thing, James. I did have experience with battle. I was killed in my first one. I lasted a total of ten seconds."

James was flabbergasted. "Ced, you can't mean that. That night in the graveyard… that wasn't a battle. I've heard Dad talk about it. He was there, remember? Pettigrew shot you with no warning. You can't seriously think…"

"Really, James," Cedric said, looking up. The ghost's eyes were very grave. "Don't ask me again. I have my reasons. I can't, all right?"

James met the ghost's gaze. After a moment, he sighed deeply. "All right, Cedric. Forget it. Sorry to bother you. See you around."

James turned and began to plod away. He got halfway down the corridor when Cedric's voice said, "Does it hurt?"

James stopped in his tracks and narrowed his eyes. He glanced back over his shoulder. "Does what hurt?"

Cedric hadn't moved. He hovered near the trophy case, looking solemnly as James. "The mark on your forehead."

James' heart skipped a beat. Without thinking, he touched the place where he'd felt the itch and the strange dart of pain outside the Headmaster's office. "You can see it?" he whispered harshly.

Cedric nodded slowly.

"What—" James began, but his voice failed him. He cleared his throat. "What does it look like?"

Cedric's expression didn't change. He knew James knew. "It looks like a lightning bolt, James. Just like your father's. Except it's green. It glows a little."

James' eyes were wide and his heart pounded. The spot on his forehead felt warm. It tingled a little now that he thought about it. He looked helplessly up at Cedric again.

"Don't worry," Cedric said, sensing James' question. "I don't think anyone else can see it. Apart from the other ghosts, maybe. It's only been there for a week or so. At first, it was very faint, but now… That's why I asked if it hurt."

James' thoughts were whirling. What could it mean? Why was it happening? "It does hurt sometimes," James admitted. "But just a little. Mostly, it just itches. Except for one time, right outside the Headmaster's office. Merlin looked at me and it… it stung. But just for a second."

Cedric nodded once, solemnly. "Pay attention to it, James. It must be there for a reason. But be careful. It might not be trustworthy."

James nodded, barely hearing. He glanced around quickly, just to make sure no one had approached and heard the conversation. The corridor was still empty. When he looked up again, Cedric's ghost had vanished.

"Cedric?" James whispered. There was no response. James couldn't be sure whether the ghost had truly left, or just gone invisible. "Cedric, if you're still there, and you change your mind… well, you know where to find me, right?"

The corridor was utterly still and silent. James touched his forehead again, wonderingly and worryingly. Finally, he sighed, turned, and began to trudge back toward the staircases and the Gryffindor common room.

As soon as James reached the common room, he told Rose about his meeting with Cedric. She was surprisingly understanding about the ghost's refusal to teach the class, remembering the conversation they'd had in the corridor a week earlier.

"He'll probably come around," she said, nodding. "We'll just need to find somebody else in the meantime. It's fine, really. None of the students we talked to today knew anything about Cedric anyway."

"But who can we get to teach in the meantime?" James fretted. "People will be coming tomorrow with some expectations, Rose! We can't just tell them to open their Defence textbooks and start trying out whatever spells they feel like! It'd be a complete mess!"

Rose looked thoughtful. "We could ask Viktor, maybe. He's going to be here until the end of next week. He certainly knows his stuff."

"He's too tight with Debellows," James said. "He'd tell him first off and we'd never hear the end of it."

Rose had been scanning the room idly. Suddenly, her eyes widened. She glanced back at James, a crooked smile curling her lip. "There is *one* person already among us who seems to know a good bit of defensive magic."

"The older years don't want to do it," James sighed. "We've already been through it with them, Rose."

"Actually," Rose said, looking askance again, "the person I was thinking of is a year *younger* than you."

James followed the direction of his cousin's gaze. Scorpius Malfoy sat at a table across the room, idly flipping pages in a textbook. He glanced up, noticing James' gaze, and sneered slightly.

"Not in a thousand years, Rose," James said flatly, turning back and crossing his arms. "Not in a million years."

"I'm just saying," Rose said innocently, "you said he was using Stunning Spells on the train against Albus. And the other second-years have been talking about what he did to your headboard, which is, you have to admit, pretty impressive. He knows levitation already, and—"

"No, Rose!" James hissed, interrupting. "I'll take a term of Debellows and the Gauntlet before I'll ask him to teach me anything!"

"Are you willing to speak for the rest of the club's members too?"

"He's not a teacher! He's a stuck-up prat! He probably wouldn't even do it if we asked him! People like him aren't exactly the sharing type."

Rose smoothed her robes primly. "Well, you can't know unless you try. Really, James. Do we want a teacher or not?"

James shook his head. "We want a teacher, not a smug little twit who's learned a few tricks. If you want him to teach, you ask him."

"I might just do that," Rose replied breezily. She collected her bag and walked away. James watched her, but she merely climbed the stairs to the girls' dormitories. If she meant to ask Scorpius to teach the new Defence Club, she apparently wasn't planning on doing it tonight. After a while, James climbed the stairs on the opposite side of the room.

As he got ready for bed, he thought carefully about the conversation he'd had with Cedric's ghost. He should've known that Cedric would refuse to lead the club, and yet it really had seemed like part of Cedric wanted to do it. And what could it possibly mean that Cedric was seeing a glowing green lightning bolt scar on James' head? As James finished brushing his teeth in the tiny washroom, he leaned in, examining himself in the mirror. As far as he could see, his forehead was completely unmarked. And yet, even now, he could feel that tiny, telltale tingling. Often, James had seen people pointing at his father, recognizing him by the famous scar, and James had thought it would be cool to have such a mark. Back then, James hadn't understood the price his dad had paid for that scar. Even now, he couldn't completely understand it, but he understood it enough, especially now that he'd lost grandfather Weasley. He knew enough not to want such a thing for himself anymore. For a while last year, James had struggled with expectations of following in the footsteps of his famous father. Now, James knew those footsteps were far too big for him. More importantly, James had his own path to travel, and it was unique to him. It wasn't just a replay of what his father had done. He'd learned that lesson, hadn't he? So why was he experiencing this phantom lightning bolt scar? What was it trying to tell him? And could he trust it?

There was no point in worrying about it. And yet it was hard to let it go. Eventually, as he climbed into his bed, James distracted himself by trying to think of someone else who might possibly serve as teacher for the new Defence Club. He couldn't think of anyone, and he certainly wasn't going to ask Scorpius, but it did take his mind off the mysterious tingling on his forehead. Finally, eventually, James drifted to sleep.

There were voices, echoing indistinctly, or perhaps it was only one voice, but the echoes made it sound like more. James couldn't understand any of the actual words, but the sound of the voice was both soothing and maddening, like scratching a poison ivy rash. It was dark, but there were flashes of something, like glints of light on the edges of blades scything the air. Beneath the voice was the clank and rumble of ancient machinery and a tinkling of water, all echoing disorientingly. Footsteps rattled on stone and the voice grew closer. James could hear words, but they were disconnected and strange. Light bloomed, flickering as if through water. It was green, and there were faces in it. A man and a woman, beckoning, smiling sadly, hopefully…

"James, you're dreaming, you big div. Wake up!"

A bag of laundry whumped James' head and he jerked upright, blinking.

"S'bout time," Graham muttered sleepily. "I been trying to get you awake for a solid minute. You always talk in your sleep?"

James looked blearily at Graham. "How would I know," he muttered grumpily, "if I do it when I'm asleep?" The dream circled his head like a swarm of gnats, but he couldn't remember much of it. Dawn light seeped into the room as Graham slid out of bed.

"Well, we might as well get up anyway," Graham said. "I can smell bacon all the way up here. Let's go get a plateful before Hugo gets down there and wolfs it all."

The day brightened to a wonderfully warm autumn afternoon. The morning's classes droned by and James hardly noticed, distracted in turns by thoughts of the previous night's strange dream, fretting about who could lead that afternoon's first Defence Club meeting, and Cedric's worrying words about the phantom scar on his head. At some point, James connected the dream with the scar, remembering that his father's scar had once been a sort of gateway into the thoughts of Voldemort. But Voldemort was long since dead. His father's scar hadn't hurt him in two decades. Whatever the phantom sign on James' forehead meant, it couldn't be a link to any resurgent Dark Lord, for his dad would surely have felt it first.

Unless, James thought with a start, it was connecting him to the Bloodline, the secret successor of Voldemort that the tree sprite had told him about last year. James shuddered as he knelt on the grass at Hagrid's Care of Magical Creatures class. How could he possibly be connecting to the Bloodline? His father, Harry Potter, was the one with the scar, not James. Why him?

Your father's battle is over, the tree sprite had said, yours begins.

"James," Hagrid said, glancing at him over the other students, "something wrong with yer Eel den?"

James looked down at the muddy, slimy mess in front of his knees. He plunged a hand into it, feeling for the Mucous Eel he'd just planted. "No, no, it's great, Hagrid. Slimy as can be. Really, it's great."

"This is completely repulsive," Ralph said, mucking his hand in his own excavation. It slopped and

slurped disgustingly. Suddenly, he lunged and pulled, yanking the tail of his Mucous Eel out of the muck.

"Very good!" Hagrid called heartily. "Ralph's got 'is turned upright. As soon as the Eel's face-down in its den, it goes limp. Jus' rub its belly nice an' slow. That'll make it hibernate. Then we can harvest the Eel's slime. Very useful stuff, Mucous Eel slime."

Graham grimaced and flung ropes of slime from his fingers. "So is this thing a plant or an animal, Hagrid?"

"Well, what class are yeh in, Mr. Warton?" Hagrid asked in reply.

"Care of Magical Creatures," Graham answered in a monotone.

"Then since this isn't Professor Longbottom's Herbology class," Hagrid said, grinning, "I s'pose yeh can assume the Slime Eel is a magical creature with some unusual planty tendencies, can't yeh?"

"Professor Hagrid!" Morgan Patonia suddenly called, struggling to keep her voice even. "I think I pulled my Eel too hard!"

Everyone looked. Morgan had leapt to her feet and was holding her Mucous Eel at arm's length, cringing away from the flailing, meter-long creature. Fans of greenish slime flew from the Eel, splattering Morgan's robes and the ground beneath it.

"Don' let 'er go!" Hagrid cried, throwing up his hands. "Lower 'er back to 'er den, but don' let go! She'll wriggle down to the lake an' we'll never see 'er again, an' those Eels are right dear! Just lower 'er carefully head-first into the den, that's the way, Miss Patonia."

Ralph watched Morgan dip the wriggling Eel back to the mess of slimy dirt. Her face was a mask of utter disgust. The Eel's arrow-shaped head touched the mud, and the body lunged forward, trying to burrow into the den.

"There yeh go, then," Hagrid sighed, relaxing. "No harm done. A good lesson for us all, in fact. Keep the head in the den. Better safe than sorry, eh, Miss Patonia?"

Morgan smiled gamely, looking as if she was, in fact, plenty sorry. Slime glistened in ropey slashes across her robe.

"Before I found out I was a wizard," Ralph said wistfully, staring at Morgan's robes, "I was planning to attend the Byron Bruggman School for Boys. I bet they don't do anything with Mucous Eels there."

"Just think what you'd be missing," Graham said, smiling ruefully. He flicked a fingerful of slime at Ralph.

Later that day, James was making his way through the crowded halls, glancing surreptitiously around,

as if worried he was being followed. The afternoon free period had been co-opted by Professor Curry's drama auditions, and James was on his way to the Muggle Studies classroom. At a cross-corridor, James met Rose and Ralph, who were talking animatedly.

"What are you two doing?" James asked, stopping and glancing at each one in turn.

"Well, I was coming to watch Petra audition for the role of Astra," Rose replied, "if that's all right with you, cousin."

"And I'm just going along because the alternative is to go start my Charms homework," Ralph replied. "Rose says she'll help me with it if I wait until tonight. It's a no-brainer. What about you?"

"Me?" James said, his voice squeaking guiltily. "Nothing. Really. I just… Same reason. Come on, let's go then."

As they entered the Muggle Studies classroom, James' face was beet red. He walked quickly to the front of the classroom, hoping Ralph and Rose wouldn't follow him. He angled into the second row, and was annoyed to see that both of them were filing in after him.

"What's with you, James?" Rose asked, sitting down and frowning at him curiously.

"Did you find a place for the Defence Club to meet?" James replied, changing the subject.

"Yeeaahh," Rose said slowly, still studying James' face. "The gymnasium isn't being used in the evenings, so I've gotten us permission to meet there. It's all taken care of."

"The gym?" Ralph moaned. "I hate that place. That's where Debellows has his class. Is that all you could find?"

"It's the perfect meeting place," Rose replied stiffly. "There're no tables or chairs to get in the way and there are already plenty of targets for spell practice. And eventually, if we begin conducting practice duels, the padded floors will be very helpful."

"Are you sure duels are a good idea?" Ralph asked. "I mean, James did tell the Headmaster we wouldn't be practicing on each other."

"Duels are essential to proper defensive technique, Ralph," Rose said, rolling her eyes. "You can't get any good shooting spells at non-moving targets. Besides, I'd rather the Headmaster not know the extent of our training. He might try to shut us down."

James scowled. "Rose, that's ridiculous. Merlin would probably be happy that we're learning real magical battle techniques."

"Oh? Then why'd he hire Debellows in the first place?" Rose asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Merlin's not in charge of those kind of decisions," James replied, but uncertainly.

"My mum and your dad both work at the Ministry, James. We both know that the Headmaster has final verdict about faculty. Besides, Merlin isn't the kind of man to let other people make decisions for him. Debellows is here because Merlin wants him here."

Ralph said, "That doesn't mean he's trying to keep us from learning anything useful."

"No," Rose agreed easily. "But if he was, Debellows is a great way to make sure we didn't. And after what we saw in the Mirror, I'd rather not take any chances."

James opened his mouth to argue with Rose, but at that moment, Professor Curry stood and cleared her throat.

"Thank you all so much for coming," she trilled. "These auditions aren't mandatory class-times, so I take it as a sign of healthy interest in our production that so many of you have come to observe. Of course, this is not exactly how auditions are conducted in the Muggle theatre, but in the interests of education, we've chosen a rather more public casting format. Today, we'll be completing auditions for the role of Astra, Treus, King Julian, and the Marsh Hag. Final decisions will be made by myself and the elected representatives from the major theatre departments. Let's show some appreciation for the head of the props department, Mr. Jason Smith, the director of the costume shop, Miss Gennifer Tellus, the head of the stage crew, Mr. Hugo Paulson, and finally, my official production assistant and associate director, Miss Tabitha Corsica."

The four representatives were seated at a long table arranged in a front corner, positioned at an angle so that it faced both the classroom and the area designated as the audition stage. The four students accepted the round of halfhearted applause, nodding and smiling. Hugo stood and threw his arms wide, as if accepting an award. He bowed deeply and Gennifer Tellus yanked him back into his seat, rolling her eyes. At the end of the table, Tabitha smiled inscrutably. Briefly, she made eye contact with James and winked. James frowned at her.

"First up," Professor Curry said, consulting a sheaf of parchment in her hand, "we will be viewing the final two candidates for the role of Astra. Miss Josephina Bartlett, seventh-year, Ravenclaw, will read first. Please, as always, silence from the gallery is appreciated. That means no applause, thank you. Miss Bartlett, whenever you are ready."

Josephina Bartlett virtually pranced to the front of the room, her robes bouncing around her and her long blonde hair catching the sunlight from the windows.

"Thank you, all of you, and particularly the parts committee," Josephina said, smiling winningly. "Whomever you choose, this has been a wonderful opportunity for me and all of the other candidates."

"Just read, Josephina," Gennifer said, arching an eyebrow.

Josephina cranked her grin a notch higher, glaring at Gennifer, then suddenly dropped her arms and head as if she'd been switched off. She took a deep breath, apparently staring at the floor between her

feet. Then, slowly, she raised her head. Her eyes were glistening. She stared out over the assembled students, a look of beatific anguish etched onto her face.

"Behold!" she exclaimed, raising her arm so fast that her sleeve flopped. She pointed straight ahead. Sitting at the committee table, Hugo actually looked to see what Josephina was pointing at. Gennifer nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. Josephina drew a huge, shuddering breath. "Be that the waning sun to light my love's returning sail, or are my eyes deceived by heart's desire? If't be that now he lies at th' ocean's deepest grave, then ne'er permit my soul to wake, nor fervid dreams to pass: t'is better laid in slumber's crypt than t'walk in living death, the world, my hell, without dear Treus! Hark, my heart, from plight to break, it must! O Treus, is't thee? State thy coming now, or let me join thy bed and sleep in dreary death! But daren't restrain my soul to waiting anguish! Treus, make thy answer known, or bid my soul depart— depart!—to flee to everlasting sleep—to death!"

Josephina fell silent, and a single tear traced a path down her cheek. Her lip quivered minutely. Then, suddenly, her face cleared. She wiped the tear away with her sleeve and smiled at the gallery. There was a collective exhale. Even James had been holding his breath. Rose glanced over at him, annoyed. James shrugged and Rose rolled her eyes.

"Nicely done, Miss Bartlett," Curry said from her seat at the table. "Perhaps a bit, er, melodramatic but certainly quite evocative. Any comments from the table?"

Hugo's face was screwed up with concentration. "What's 'fervid' mean?"

Gennifer sighed, and then turned to Josephina. "You've obviously practiced, Jo, and it shows. Nice preparation."

"Tell me," Tabitha said, lowering her eyes to the tabletop and furrowing her brow, "were you attempting to present Astra as sad and forlorn, or are we to believe that she has just experienced a complete frontal lobotomy?"

Josephina's smile went brittle. "Take it however you want, Tabitha. I don't think anyone else shares your, ah, professional interpretation."

"I'm not sure that matters exactly," Tabitha said sweetly, meeting Josephina's eyes.

"If you wanted the part," Josephina said, dropping her smile, "then you should've auditioned for it. Otherwise, let those few who know how to act do their job."

"Point noted, Miss Bartlett," Curry said quickly. "Please feel free to return to your seat. Now, also reading for the part of Astra, we have Petra Morganstern, seventh-year, Gryffindor. Miss Morganstern, are you prepared for your reading?"

Petra rose from her seat at the back of the room. James turned to watch her approach the stage area. She had the script with her, and as she turned to face the gallery, she consulted it. Her lips moved as she read the first lines.

"I tried to practice with her," Rose whispered to James, "but she said she wanted to do it fresh, with no rehearsing. I swear, she's hardly even read the whole script yet."

Petra lowered the script again and coughed into her fist. Finally, she looked out over the crowd of students, her face almost blank but for a very slight furrowing of her brow. There was almost ten seconds of silence, and James was worried that Petra had already forgotten her lines. Finally, almost in a whisper, Petra said the first word of the reading: "Hark."

The entire room seemed to lean forward as Petra recited the lines, quietly, thoughtfully, as if to herself. Her voice rose only to normal speaking volume as she reached the end.

"O Treus, is't thee?" she said, and her voice was full of doubt, as if she knew Astra's hope was as frail as tissue. "State thy coming now, or let me join thy bed and sleep in dreary death…" She paused, and her voice dropped again, to just above a whisper. "Treus, make thy answer known, or bid my soul depart… to flee to everlasting sleep… to death."

Petra stopped, her face still wearing the same expression she'd begun with. She seemed to be looking through the back wall at something very far-off, like a mirage. Then, without a glance at the committee table, she tucked the script under her arm and walked back down the center aisle. James watched her until she returned to her seat.

"Very nice, Miss Morganstern," Professor Curry said. "A bit soft for the stage, but we can work on the histrionics when the time comes."

"She missed the second 'depart'," Josephina muttered from her seat.

There didn't seem to be any comments from the table. Curry stood, producing her sheaf of parchments again and adjusting her spectacles. "Next, we have final readings for the part of Treus. We've narrowed the candidates to some of the younger years since Treus is meant to be the younger of Astra's two suitors."

James' face burned. He'd never told Ralph or Rose that he'd signed up for the part of Treus. His first reading had gone fairly well, although it had only been Professor Curry and a few first-years at that initial audition. He didn't even know who else was in line for the part. He glanced over at Rose and Ralph.

"I need to tell you something," he whispered urgently.

"Shh!" Rose hissed.

"Only two candidates remain for the role of Treus," Curry was saying. "One is from Slytherin and the other is from Gryffindor, but ironically, both are from the same family. First up, in order of first name since they both have the same last name," Curry smiled indulgently and took off her spectacles, "first-year, Slytherin, Albus Potter."

Simultaneously, James, Ralph, and Rose's mouths dropped open. Rose and Ralph turned toward James, but James spun in his seat, looking for his brother. Albus jumped to his feet and jogged to the front of the room, throwing a smile and a shrug in James' direction. James couldn't believe it. Albus, in a play? Of course, it wasn't any more surprising than James himself trying out for a play, but still. So this had been the meaning of Tabitha's sly wink from the committee table. She'd probably put Albus up to it, just to cause a rift between the two brothers. And Albus was letting her succeed in the attempt. James fumed angrily in his seat.

"You little twonk!" Rose rasped, elbowing James. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I tried!" James replied, still watching his brother hop onto the stage area. "Er, ten seconds ago."

Albus had apparently memorized his reading. He cleared his throat, and then glanced aside at the committee table. "Am I supposed to say anything?" he asked brightly. "This is only my second time trying out for a play. Am I supposed to thank the academy or something first?"

"That comes rather later, Mr. Potter," Curry said, smiling indulgently. "Just read the lines, please. At your leisure."

Albus nodded. To James' eye, his brother didn't look the slightest bit nervous. He bobbed on the balls of his feet a little, and then flung out his hands, as if encompassing the room. "Foul Donovan!" he cried, his face darkening. "Thou trait'rous malcontent! Had been there room amongst my thoughts for more than Eros' spell and vanity, I might have seen thy wicked plot afoot. My sinister and foolish pride did make me bade thy oily tongue, and dreams of fame to take this quest of doom; and now I lie so far removed an obstacle to vile and vicious victory. O Astra, wife of mine at heart, reverse my sails and send a wind to turn us north; we still may beat that villain's storm! To arms, we'll take, O men, to bear the force of righteous truth: the spear to pierce his lying heart! But spy, his clouds hath blocked the sun, and time hath turned to foe! Wizards and men, forth draw ye wands and wits to fight the violent seas this night, that by the morn we'll hold our win, or lie in beds of ocean sand: our beaten glory's shrine!"

Albus finished his rousing speech with a triumphant cry, shaking an invisible wand at the sky. There was a scattering of laughter and a few whoops of hearty encouragement. This speech was, after all, a classic rallying cry in the wizarding world. A few brave observers had even recited the last line alongside Albus, grinning and shaking their own invisible wands.

"Thank you, Mr. Potter," Curry called loudly, stifling the outbursts. "Very spirited but not exactly as grave as one might expect. The soldiers are not embarking on a Quidditch match; they are facing the likelihood of their own doom. One might expect their leader to be a bit less glib. Still though, very enthusiastically performed. Please return to your seat."

Curry didn't need to consult her parchments. As Albus retreated to his seat, grinning and accepting high-fives from some of his friends, Curry looked directly at James. "And now, also reading for the role of Treus, the elder Potter, James. Second-year, Gryffindor. Whenever you are ready, Mr. Potter,

the stage is all yours."

James felt stuck to his seat. He forced himself to stand, and then sidled past Rose and Ralph. By the time he got to the stage, his mind was a complete blank. He'd memorized the audition lines, but now, distracted by Albus' surprise performance, he couldn't even think of the first word. He glanced over at the committee table and grinned sheepishly. Professor Curry nodded encouragement. Tabitha was smiling smugly, obviously enjoying James' discomfort. A spark of anger flared in James as he looked at that grin, and with that anger, he remembered the first two words of his lines.

"Foul Donovan," James said, turning to look out at the gallery. His eyes met Albus', and his anger increased. It smoldered in his words as he delivered them through partially gritted teeth. "Thou trait'rous malcontent! Had been there room amongst my thoughts for more than Eros' spell and vanity, I might have seen thy wicked plot afoot…" As the words came, James allowed his own resentment to fuel them. His voice rose, and he even allowed himself to look askance at Tabitha. He was grimly pleased to see she was no longer smiling. "Wizards and men, forth draw ye wands and wits," James said, as if relishing the idea of a fight. "To fight the violent seas this night, that by the morn we'll hold our win, or lie in beds of ocean sand: our beaten glory's shrine!"

Rose erupted into applause. Ralph and a few others joined her, but they were quickly quelled by a warning look from Professor Curry.

"Very impassioned, I must say, Mr. Potter," Curry said appreciatively. "I'm not sure where you found your motivation, but I daresay it was quite effective. Ahem. You may take your seat. Next up, we have Miss Ashley Doone, second-year, Gryffindor, reading for the part of the Marsh Hag. Miss Doone, you have the stage."

Ashley approached the stage in character, hunched over and lurching. She reached the stage, paused, and then spun around, shrieking hoarsely and hooking her fingers into claws. James, seating himself rather triumphantly in the front row, had to suppress a grin.

"That was spectacular," Rose whispered into his ear. "I wouldn't have thought you had it in you!"

"You were the one who told me I should try out for the part," James whispered back.

"Yeah, well, I was just being polite," Rose admitted. "But I'm glad I did. That was really amazing. I had goosebumps."

Twenty minutes later, the assembly filed out of the Muggle Studies classroom. James followed Rose and Ralph into the corridor and stopped, his eyes wide.

"Don't act so surprised," Rose said, clapping him on the shoulder. "You were brilliant. You deserve the part."

"But I'm not an actor," James said, looking at her a bit wildly.

"It's a bit late to worry about that little detail," Ralph grinned.

Albus shouldered through the crowd and approached his brother. "Yeah, well, I didn't really want to be up on stage anyway," he said, spreading his arms. "Have fun making lovey eyes at Josephina."

"Don't remind me," Rose said emphatically. "I can't believe they chose her over Petra."

"I thought she did pretty well," Ralph commented, looking up at the ceiling.

"You think she looked pretty well, that's all," Rose replied, shaking her head. "I can see right through you, Ralph Deedle."

"That's not true," Ralph said defensively. "Well, I mean, it is true, but that's not why I think she deserves the part."

Tabitha stepped out of the classroom and spied Albus. She smiled and walked over toward the group. "Congratulations, James. Inspiring performance. It's good to see you and Albus aren't too competitive about such things."

"Get stuffed, Corsica," James said, turning away. "Don't try to act happy that we aren't at each other's throats."

Tabitha looked mournfully at James, but Albus' face darkened. "What the bloody hell is wrong with you, James? You act like Tabitha has it in for us. I'll bet you don't even know that she voted for you to get the part! And I agreed with her! So why don't you just back off a little, eh?"

James wheeled on his brother, but another voice called out before he could respond.

"Tabitha didn't vote for me, but I still got the part," Josephina said. She smiled at Tabitha from where she stood, surrounded by a gaggle of exulting Ravenclaw girls. "Score one for 'full frontal lobotomy', score zero for Tabitha's 'professional interpretation'."

The girls giggled as Josephina batted her eyes, and then turned to walk away. Tabitha seemed as unruffled as always, but she'd also forgotten about James. She swept into the throng without looking back, apparently following Josephina and her entourage. Albus threw a rankled look at James and stalked away as well.

"I'm going to go find Petra," Rose said, shaking her head in disgust. "She's sure to be disappointed about losing the part. I'll see the two of you in the gym after dinner. Don't forget."

"We won't," Ralph replied, annoyed.

"For the last half an hour, I'd completely forgotten about that dratted club meeting," James mourned, turning to follow the rest of the departing students toward dinner in the Great Hall.

"Don't worry about it," Ralph said happily. "What's a little Defence Club meeting to the great Treus,

Conqueror of the Caspian Sea?"

9. The Lady of the Lake

James sat with Graham and Hugo at dinner, letting most of the conversation drift over him as he concentrated on how best to manage the Defence Club meeting. Rose had eaten quickly and gone ahead to make sure the gym was ready for them, and Ralph was busy collecting the names of everyone who'd expressed interest in being involved. The list had grown rather long, and James' trepidation about the class had grown with it. Even though he was sharing responsibility for the class with Ralph and Rose, he couldn't help feeling that the club members would look to him as the symbolic leader of the troop. Finally, having barely eaten, James left the table. It wouldn't hurt for him to get to the gym a little early as well, and it would probably be comforting to be around Rose anyway. She seemed positively casual about the entire affair. James suspected that her Weasley heritage rather enjoyed the giddy uncertainty and potential for disaster.

As he left the Great Hall, James felt a nagging, anonymous worry. It was as if he was forgetting something important, but he couldn't identify what it might be. Even as he moved through the halls and corridors, there was a sense of anxious anticipation in the air. Students moved in groups, obviously engrossed in spirited conversation, awaiting the evening's events. James sighed nervously and turned the corner toward the gym.

"There you are," Rose said, as if she'd expected James hours ago. "The gym is almost ready. There are already people waiting outside in the hall. We just need to roll up the floor pads and wheel in one of the chalkboards."

"Why do we need a chalkboard?" James asked.

Rose gave him an impatient glance. "So we can write down the spells and hexes we practice. It'll be a lot easier for people to concentrate if they don't have to memorize the incantations on the spot. There's a chalkboard on casters over in the Charms classroom, next hall over. Go and wheel it in here and we'll be ready to get started."

Annoyed at being ordered around but glad of the distraction, James turned around and left the gym. Sure enough, students were gathering in the hall outside. They leaned against the wall and sat on the floor in loose groups, all of them looking up as James came out.

"We'll, er, start in just a few minutes," James said, trying to put some authority into his voice. Nearby, Cameron Creevey grinned and waved. A gaggle of first-years stood with him, their eyes wide and excited. James blinked at the gathering students. There was a good number of them, although not as many as he'd expected. He should have been relieved, but he wasn't. That nagging worry crept over him again. What was he forgetting?

James worked his way around to the next corridor, which was darker and completely deserted. He got to the Charms classroom and found it unlocked. The chalkboard stood on a wooden frame in the corner. Tiny metal wheels were attached to the bottom. James grabbed the end of the frame and began to pull, but the wheels were rusty. They squealed and dragged on the floor.

From the doorway, a voice asked, "Do you require some assistance, Mr. Potter?"

James spun as if he'd been caught doing something illegal. Merlin stood in the doorway, almost completely blocking it. His form was very shadowy in the dim room.

"I'm—" James began, surprised that he felt so nervous. After all, they had permission to hold the club meeting, didn't they? And yet he felt a strong reluctance to tell the Headmaster what he was doing. "I'm just trying to move the chalkboard. We, er, wanted to borrow it. To make some notes."

Merlin nodded inscrutably. "How are preparations for your defensive techniques club coming along, James?"

James' heart quickened. "Uh… good. Fine. We've been pretty busy, you know. But… good."

"Would you like some assistance with that?" Merlin asked in his low, rumbling voice. "I'd be happy to help you relocate it to wherever you wish. If anyone wondered what you were up to, I could vouch for your 'borrowing' it."

"No, thanks," James said quickly, letting go of the chalkboard. "Actually, we probably don't really need it. It was just an idea, but it's not worth the trouble. Really."

Merlin didn't move for a long moment. Finally, he seemed to relax and smile. "As you wish, James."

The big man turned to leave, and James felt a huge, strange sense of relief as Merlin's gaze left him. The club would just have to do without the chalkboard, James determined. He crossed the darkened classroom and was nearly to the door when Merlin turned back, his eyes glittering in the dark corridor.

"Honestly, I didn't expect you to be inside tonight, James," the big wizard said curiously.

James didn't quite know how to respond. "Er… no? Where did you expect me to be?"

"Tonight is rather an important night for many students. I understand that even those who do not intend to participate rather enjoy watching the proceedings. They like to get a sense of how the season might

progress."

A sudden sinking sensation filled James. His cheeks went cold. "Oh no…," he said, widening his eyes. "It's tonight! That's why there were fewer people than I expected in the hall! It's already started!"

"Is it possible that you forgot?" Merlin said, a strange smile creeping over his face. "I assumed you were quite the fan of Quidditch. If you hurry, I expect you may still see the end of the try-outs."

James barely heard him. He turned on his heels and bolted along the corridor, cursing his forgetfulness. If he'd not been so obsessed with worrying about the stupid Defence Club, he'd have known that the first meeting conflicted with Quidditch try-outs. Neither Rose nor Ralph was trying out for the teams, so they wouldn't even have considered the conflict. James had been practicing all summer for the opportunity to be on the Gryffindor House team. He desperately wanted to make up for his devastating performance at last year's try-outs. Also, Albus was out there even now, trying out for the Slytherin team on Tabitha Corsica's cursed broomstick. James felt an obsessive impulse to be there when that happened, but he truthfully didn't know if it was because he wanted to protect Albus or sabotage him.

James pounded up the steps, calling out the password to the common room. The Fat Lady scolded him for broadcasting the password to the entire hall, but James barely heard her, shimmying through the portrait hole the moment the painting began to swing open. James grabbed his broom from beneath his bed, took the stairs two at a time down to the common room, and felt another stab of panic as he crossed the empty room. Everyone was already down at the pitch, cheering, watching the try-outs, supporting the team. James was supposed to be there!

The Fat Lady was still scolding James as he pushed through the portrait hole and flung himself down the stairs. How could he have forgotten? If he thought it was possible, he'd almost believe that Tabitha Corsica had somehow arranged for him to be absent, simply so he couldn't interfere with Albus' try-out. At the same time, a distant part of him worried that he was missing the first Defence Club meeting. Rose would probably realize where he'd gone as soon as she noticed his absence, but still, it would be a disappointment and a setback. Had Merlin appeared at that exact moment just to sabotage the first Defence Club meeting? After all, the Headmaster certainly had uncanny ways of knowing what was happening around the school. Merlin would know how important Quidditch was to James. Was it possible that he had bewitched James to forget the try-outs, just so he could strategically remind him at the last minute, thus keeping him from the club meeting?

Frustrated and annoyed, James burst out of the castle's main entrance and darted across the courtyard. As he turned toward the Quidditch pitch, he heard the maddening sound of cheers and whistles. It was nearly dark, but James could make out the shapes of the Quidditch players circling over the pitch, their cloaks snapping gaily in the wind. It was too late, but James couldn't bring himself to turn back. He cursed his luck again. How could he have forgotten Quidditch try-outs? He wouldn't have believed it was possible. What would he tell his mum and dad? How would he live it down with his housemates? Certainly, Scorpius Malfoy would make the most of it. I see, Potter, he'd say, you forgot

the try-outs, did you? Strange. And we were all so looking forward to being amazed and impressed by your performance. Perhaps you'll remember next year.

The crowd was departing even as James arrived at the pitch. He found himself wading upstream through the throng, not really knowing what he was looking for but refusing to give up. He considered getting onto his broom and simply flying out over the pitch, but he was reluctant to draw too much attention to himself. He finally shouldered onto the grass of the pitch and spied the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain, Devindar Das, collecting the house brooms.

"Dev!" James called, panting. "Tell me it isn't too late!"

Devindar stopped and looked back. "Where were you, James? It's all over. I was looking forward to seeing what you could do this year."

"I completely forgot… somehow…," James admitted desperately. "Let me go anyway! I'm ready!"

Devindar shook his head. "I can't, James. All the positions are filled already. Honestly, we had a pretty strong lineup going in. We'll need you more next year, once Hugo and Tara graduate."

James was speechless. He stood on the spot, breathing hard from his sprint out to the pitch. He glared helplessly around at the departing students and players. Louis Weasley was approaching from the Hufflepuff grandstand.

"What happened to you, James?" Louis called. "Albus was looking for you after the Slytherin tryouts."

James ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "I don't even want to talk about it. How did Albus do?"

"Oh, he was totally brilliant," Louis replied enthusiastically. "Victoire says he was the best first-year try-out she's ever seen. I bet he was the best since your dad, even! He's going to be Slytherin's Seeker. It's perfect, in a way, don't you think? I mean, your dad was Seeker for Gryffindor his first—"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it Louis," James interrupted sourly. "Is he gone already?"

"Yeah, the whole team headed back together. Albus said to tell you to come down with Ralph if you can. He's pretty excited about it. He was going to write your mum and dad first thing. They'll be totally proud, I bet."

"Yeah," James muttered, dragging his broom and heading back off the pitch. "That's great. See you around, Louis."

"I'm really sorry, James," Rose said as they climbed the stairs to the common room. "It never even occurred to me to check. And Ralph's really not much of a Quidditch fan, so he wouldn't have even noticed. I figured it out right away and assumed you'd rushed out to the pitch. So, no luck then?"

"It was a complete bust," James grumbled. "I missed the whole thing. On top of it all, Slytherin's tryouts were tonight, too, and it sounds like Al flew rings around everybody. He's going to be Slytherin's Seeker."

"Oh," Rose replied brightly. "Well, that's really cool, isn't it? He'll look very dashing in his green cloak and pads. I bet your mum and dad will be very pleased."

"I really wish people would stop saying that," James said darkly.

"I don't blame you for being angry that you missed the try-outs, James, but being jealous of Albus—"

"I'm not jealous, Rose!" James exclaimed. "The whole thing is a trick! It has to be! The Slytherins are just setting him up!"

"And why would they do that?" Rose asked simply. "If they were as black-hearted as you say, wouldn't they be trying to bury him rather than prop him up?"

"They don't work that way anymore. They're all sneaky and two-faced now. Tabitha's Fang and Talons club is just this year's version of the Progressive Element. They were the ones who set up the debate where she said that my dad was a liar and a fraud. They actually believe that Voldemort was a great fellow and that people like our parents have lied about him all these years."

"Nobody really believes that silliness," Rose replied. "It's just popular to rock the boat. Either way, Albus can handle himself. He's not a dummy."

James glowered. "He doesn't know Tabitha like I do."

"Well," Rose said, deliberately changing the subject, "Defence Club went well. We had twenty-six people, which is really good considering Quidditch try-outs were tonight. Mostly, we just talked about club goals and established the rules. I'll fill you in on that later. Then we ran through some fundamental Disarming Spells, just so everybody was starting on the same page."

"Who led the class? You?" James asked as they approached the portrait of the Fat Lady. "I can't imagine Ralph let you talk him into showing anyone how to perform Expelliarmus spells. He doesn't much trust his own wand with that kind of thing even though he's better than he used to be."

"No," Rose answered slowly. "Ralph didn't do it. And neither did I. It went very well though."

Rose said the password and the portrait swung open. The Fat Lady glared at James, remembering his conduct earlier in the evening. The sound of raucous laughter and music poured through the portrait hole.

"Then who did you get?" James asked, suddenly suspicious. He followed Rose into the crowded room. Scorpius Malfoy lounged on the couch near the fireplace. He glanced up and smiled crookedly as James and Rose entered.

"Good of you to show up, Potter," he drawled. "I understand you found a way to overlook two appointments at the same time, tonight. Not that we missed you, exactly."

"Hush, Scorpius," Rose said, sitting down on the other end of the couch. "We really should discuss plans for the next club meeting. I'd appreciate it if you two could find a way to be civil to each other."

"You really did ask him to teach the class?" James said, pointing at Malfoy. "You've got to be kidding!"

Malfoy produced his glasses from a pocket and put them on. "This really isn't your night, is it, Potter? Cheer up. You should consider yourself lucky that I'm not interested in being on the Quidditch team; otherwise, I wouldn't have been available."

"Look, both of you," Rose interjected before James could reply, "we have more important matters to discuss than how much you two annoy each other. If you haven't noticed, this Defence Club serves a more important purpose than just giving us something to do one night a week."

"How much did you tell him?" James demanded. "If *you* haven't noticed, his family is all Death Eaters! You might want to think twice about trusting him."

"Technically, my father was never actually inducted. I thought you knew that," Scorpius said, meeting James' eye. "But if you mean did she tell me about her suspicions about the Headmaster, no, she didn't. I was already well aware of them. As hard as this may be for you to believe, I'm on the same side as you, Potter."

"Hah!" James spat. "That's where you're wrong! I don't agree with either of you about Merlin. Even if there is some evil plot in the works, I'd suspect your family was involved before I'd go pointing fingers at Merlin. He saved this school last year!"

"We've *discussed* all of this, James," Rose said, motioning for James to keep his voice down. "Scorpius doesn't approve of some of the things his family has done in the past. That's part of the reason he's here in Gryffindor. And you know what we saw in the Mirror. There's no question that we have to be careful around the Headmaster. As of right now, the evidence is that he's in league with—"

"The evidence is that *you've* been suspicious of him from the beginning," James exclaimed. "But you're wrong. You're both wrong, and I'm going to prove it."

Scorpius narrowed his eyes at James. "Well, I do hope you pull that off. I suspect a lot of us would take some comfort in that proof. Until then, however…," Scorpius pointed his wand lazily at the chair next to the couch, "perhaps it would be a good idea to do as Rose says. We have a Defence Club to prepare. And she seems very stubborn about you and Ralph Deedle being a part of it. Still, if sitting in the same room with a Malfoy is too much for you, it's fine by me if you go elsewhere. There's a bed upstairs with your name on it."

James ground his teeth. Nothing had gone right this entire evening. And now he couldn't see any choice but to sit down and plan what Scorpius Malfoy was going to teach them at the next Defence Club meeting. It was singularly humiliating. He almost couldn't bring himself to do it. He still had his broom with him, reminding him of his second failure to make the Quidditch team. All he wanted to do was go back upstairs, stuff it back under his bed, and try to forget the whole mess. But Rose was looking at him pleadingly, obviously hoping that James would be able to overcome his innate dislike of the pale boy long enough to give the Defence Club a chance to work.

Sighing resignedly, James propped his broom by the fireplace and threw himself onto the chair. "Fine," he said. "What do we need to do next?"

Rose clapped her hands excitedly. "Thank you, James! I knew I could trust you. Scorpius really is a pretty good teacher, but it's hard for some of the Gryffindors to listen to him. There's still a lot of long-term prejudice against a Malfoy in Gryffindor, and having him teach the class just makes matters worse. Still, if you're there, it should really help give Scorpius the credibility he needs…"

"Hey, you guys expecting somebody?" Graham said as he entered the room. "Only, I found this bloke hanging around outside the portrait hole. He says you invited him, Rose."

Ralph grinned sheepishly as Rose jumped up. "Sorry, Ralph. I hadn't gotten around to telling James about Scorpius, and then… Well, anyway, we're all here, so let's get started!"

Scorpius looked annoyed as Ralph crammed onto the couch between him and Rose. The big boy kicked his shoes off and propped his feet on the overstuffed footstool. "Good club tonight. Scorpius here may be a skinny bloke, but he knows a few tricks. Some of you Gryffindors may have a bit of an attitude problem about him, but I need all the help I can get," Ralph said breezily. "Oh, and James?"

James glanced up at Ralph, arching an eyebrow.

Ralph smiled sheepishly. "Albus says to tell you you'll be better as Treus than he'll be as Slytherin Seeker. He was hoping he'd see you tonight. Even Tabitha asked if you were going to come down."

James didn't know what to say. After a moment, Scorpius broke the tension. "This is all very touching," he said dryly, "but I recognize Slytherin smooth-talking when I hear it. I'm a bit of an expert on the subject, as James has already pointed out. Can we discuss Defence Club now?"

The four of them talked for the next hour. James grew grudgingly confident that Scorpius may indeed be able to teach them some decent defensive spells. It turned out that he had, in fact, been tutored from an early age by his grandfather, Lucius Malfoy, who was currently in seclusion and not speaking to the family. Scorpius admitted that he hadn't seen his grandfather for a few years, ever since he and Scorpius' dad had had a rather serious row.

The fire had burned down to glowing coals and the four students were beginning to pack up for the night when Deirdre Finnigan, one of Cameron Creevey's first-year friends, barreled into the common room, panting and red-faced. She glanced wildly around the room, and then pressed through the crowd, heading directly for a rear corner.

"What's with her?" Scorpius muttered.

Rose said, "She's heading for Petra's table."

The entire room hushed as the significance of Deirdre's announcement became known. "It's true!" she was saying. "I saw them leading her to the hospital wing! She could barely stand up!"

Petra simply looked at Deirdre, her mouth slightly open.

"Who?" Hugo called from across the room. "What happened?"

"Josephina Bartlett!" Deirdre cried breathlessly, turning to face the room. "She ate a cursed peppermint and it struck her with a terrible fear of heights! They found her hugging the floor of the balcony outside the Ravenclaw common room. She couldn't even stand up! Her friends said the peppermint had come in a box of chocolates from a secret admirer, but it was obviously from some enemy instead. Madam Curio says she'll be a little better by morning, but the effects won't completely wear off for months!"

"A fear-of-heights peppermint?" Graham said, screwing up his face. "Does Weasleys' make those?"

"I don't think so," Sabrina said. "That sounds like a custom curse."

Damien narrowed his eyes. "One guess who Josephina's 'secret admirer' is. I heard all about how she and Corsica went at it during the audition."

"You're all missing the point," Deirdre said, nearly bouncing. "Josephina's been cursed with a fear of heights! She'll hardly be able to climb a curb for months!"

Sabrina's eyes widened. "She can't climb onto the stage in the amphitheater! If she can't get onto the stage…"

"She can't play the part of Astra," Damien finished, grinning. "As much as I *hate* to see anyone benefit from another's misfortune, let me be the first to congratulate our good friend Petra… the new and improved Astra de Beaugois!"

Petra looked around, an expression of surprise and disbelief on her face. "Well, I wouldn't have wanted to get the role this way," she said. "But I suppose I wouldn't turn it down either."

Sabrina whooped happily. A cheer arose from the gathered students and James saw Petra smile for the first time in weeks. Suddenly, he remembered that he was playing the part of Treus, Astra's younger love interest. His face reddened considerably as he looked across the room at Petra. He noticed Rose was smiling knowingly at him.

"What?" he said, patting his cheeks. "I'm hot. I'm sitting right next to the fireplace."

"Mm-hmm," Rose grinned, nodding. "Oh, this is going to be so much fun, cousin. I expect you'd better start practicing up. Petra's going to have pretty high expectations for 'the kiss of true and everlasting love'."

Over the next week, autumn finally descended in full, putting a brisk chill into the air and painting the trees with vibrant oranges, reds, and yellows. Hagrid took his Care of Magical Creatures class into their winter classroom: a huge, ancient barn with stone walls and thick, cobwebbed rafters. There, he'd assembled an impressive array of fantastic creatures, all arranged in order of size. Along the entrance wall was a range of cages and pens, out of which emanated the sounds of amiable snufflings, grunts, squeals, and barks. On the other side of the dirt floor was a line of stables, each one larger than the last. The nearest one sheltered a hippogriff whose name, according to the sign painted on the gate, was Flintflank. The creature snapped its beak at the nearby cages, apparently hungry for their contents. The larger stables had thick doors, preventing any peek at their occupants. The last two doors were plated with iron and barred with huge crossbeams. They were easily twenty feet tall. Occasionally, an unsettlingly resonant growl or burst of roar would shake the barn.

James shrugged out of his cloak as he walked through the great front door, surprised at the warmth of the space despite the day's crisp chill.

"How's he heat a place like this?" Ralph asked, craning his head up at the high, wooden ceiling. "It's right balmy in here."

The students filed into the barn, peering curiously into the cages or tentatively approaching the hippogriff's stable. The great beast stamped its foreleg and tossed its beaked head.

"Stay well back now," Hagrid called. "We'll meet old Flintflank a bit later in the year. Until then, it's best if he sees yeh from across the room instead of right in front of 'im. Let's start the season off by gettin' t'know some of the smaller beasts here in the cages an' such."

Hagrid led the class over to the smaller cages lining the wall. He fiddled with one of the locks as he spoke. "We've been right lucky over the years to come across so many examples of the magical world's most unusual creatures. A former student o' mine has become something of an expert on beast tracking, and she brings me any creatures she finds that've been injured or fallen sick. I do my best to nurse 'em back to health, but a few of 'em never gets to the point of being able to survive in the wild again. I give 'em the best home I can, o' course. The end result is that we've become rather well-known around the magical world for our menagerie," Hagrid turned, cradling a small lump of breathing brown fur in his arm. "Why, experts come from the world over to meet and study our little family. Isn't that right, Punkin?"

Ralph leaned toward James and whispered, "I talked to Rose this morning. She thinks she's found out something important about Merlin."

James whispered back, "Whatever it is, I don't want to hear it. She's always digging up new dirt from some old legend or crusty history book. We know most of that stuff's not true."

"I don't know it's not true," Ralph murmured, "I just know he doesn't quite seem like that anymore. Either way, she says you'll want to hear it. It explains a little bit of where all the stories came from about how he didn't love the Muggle world. She says it 'puts it all in context', whatever that means."

James pressed his lips together doubtfully. He'd told Rose and Scorpius that he intended to prove Merlin wasn't involved in the conspiracy they'd witnessed in the Mirror, but he hadn't yet done it. In fact, the idea of doing so frightened him quite a lot. It wasn't that he didn't have a plan. He did, and it was quite simple. It would require some bravery and the help of Cedric's ghost, and it could get him into quite a lot of trouble if he was caught, but none of those things were what worried him. He felt a strange, pressing reluctance to go ahead with it, mostly because he was secretly afraid of what he might discover. If he was right, then Merlin wasn't involved, and James could prove it to Rose and everyone else. But what if he was wrong? Despite his words to the contrary, James was worried about it. What if he went through with his plan and found that the Headmaster was, in fact, in league with the former Death Eaters and that horrible, smoky entity? Worse, what if the entity was the thing the cave skeleton, Farrigan, had talked about: the Gatekeeper, which Merlin was supposedly responsible for bringing into the world? The Headmaster had been acting rather secretive and suspicious. He'd forbidden James from telling anyone what the skeleton of Farrigan had said, and that was worrisome in itself. If what the skeleton had said wasn't true, why would Merlin care if James told anyone?

James shook his head. Surely, Merlin had his reasons. Merlin had to be good. He'd come back to help when the school had been threatened by the Muggle reporter, hadn't he? And all because James had asked him.

And that, James realized with a sinking coldness, was why he couldn't face the idea that Merlin might not be who he claimed he was. Because James was responsible, twice over, for bringing the great wizard here: first, by being manipulated by Madame Delacroix into facilitating Merlin's return to the present day, and second, by sending a message of help to Merlin via the tree sprites, with whom

Merlin was able to commune. It had even been James' advice that led his father and uncle to campaign for Merlin to become the new school Headmaster. If Merlin was involved in something evil, then it was on James' head. He would be ultimately responsible for whatever happened. Recognizing that, James knew that he *had* to find out what Merlin's intentions really were, no matter what. And if, by some horrible chance, Merlin was in league with evil, then it was up to James to foil him, no matter what it took.

"Now then," Hagrid was saying, beaming out over the students, "who wants to come up an' give me a hand feeding li'l Punkin the Tripthroat?"

Trenton Bloch raised his hand and Hagrid beckoned him forward. "Here yeh go, Mr. Bloch. Just dangle this wee bit of Lempweed in the air, but not too close. Hold it up an' let me bring Punkin toward yeh."

Trenton seemed annoyed at the caution Hagrid was taking with the little ball of panting fur. It looked rather like a kitten, but with no apparent head, tail, or limbs. "What's it going to do, Hagrid?" Trenton asked, holding up the rubbery bit of plant. "Purr me to death?"

Trenton's last word turned into a little shriek of surprise as something huge and furry lunged up from the ball in Hagrid's arms. It reared a slobbering, toothless mouth and clamped down on Trenton's entire hand. With a loud slurping sound, it sucked the bit of Lempweed out of Trenton's hand and retreated, disappearing into the tiny, panting ball of fur in Hagrid's arms. Trenton yanked his hand back, shaking it and shuddering visibly.

"Nicely done, Mr. Bloch," Hagrid cried, laughing. "Punkin likes yeh! Or else she thinks you're a frog with a bit more Lempweed on yer backside. Normally, Tripthroats live in the marsh where they suck the weed off the little amphibious creatures an' then spit 'em back out. None too pleasant for the frogs, but totally harmless."

Trenton stared at his hand, which was coated with a viscous green goo. He looked helplessly at Hagrid.

"Yeh might want to go wash that off, Mr. Bloch. Frogskin is immune to the Tripthroat's digestive juices, but yeh might get a bit itchy if yeh leave it there. There's a pump and basin over by the big stables. That's a lad."

Hagrid placed Punkin back in her cage and locked it. He was just explaining the lifespan of the Tripthroat when a very large roar rumbled the building's foundation. James looked toward the sound of the roar, his eyes wide and his heart suddenly pounding. Trenton was quickly backing away from the huge, ironframed door, his hands still dripping water from the basin.

"Oh, she caught yer scent, Mr. Bloch! Silly me, I forgot, she loves a good Tripthroat snack. Stand aside now, that's right. She's about to blow!"

Suddenly, an enormous noise filled the barn. To James, it sounded something like a freight train

mixed with a cyclone. The barn heated appreciably and the center of the iron door began to glow a dull red.

"My apologies, Mr. Bloch," Hagrid said. "Ol' Norberta doesn't get many Tripthroats these days, but she can smell when they're nearby. I should've warned yeh."

"So that's how he keeps the barn heated," Ralph said nervously, his eyes wide. "He keeps a dragon! A real, live dragon!"

"That's not just any dragon," James said, grinning, "that's like an old family friend. Uncle Charlie's been keeping tabs on her for years. She wounded a wing a few years back and now she can't fly. Not being able to fly is a death sentence in the dragon world. They eat their own, you know."

"She's really just a great softie," Hagrid said affectionately. "I've known 'er since she was a hatchling. Still, it doesn't do to stand too near her doors when she's in a flaming mood. We'll take her out this winter, give her a little exercise. She likes a good romp in the snow, does the old dear."

"Excellent!" Ashley Doone said from behind James. "Maybe Trenton will volunteer to feed her as well! Slytherins and dragons are supposed to have quite the rapport."

"No chance," Trenton said as he rejoined the students, his face flushed and angry. "I wonder if my parents know that this great oaf is keeping a dragon on school grounds. He's been a maniac for years, but this is completely daft."

"Shut up, Trenton," James said amiably. "Norberta's safe. Safer than you with a Tripthroat at least."

"We'll see about that," Trenton muttered darkly.

James spent most of Muggle Studies in the rather uncomfortable process of being measured for his Treus costume. Gennifer Tellus, in charge of the costume shop, performed the duties herself, a quill behind her ear and a couple of pins clenched between her lips.

"Stand still," she said around the pins. "You're not letting me get a good inseam measurement. You want your pantaloons to be saggy?"

"It tickles!" James replied, and then asked suspiciously, "What are pantaloons?"

"Don't ask me to explain them. It's best if you don't think about it. Just know that you're getting off easy compared to what Petra has to wear."

James wanted to ask but decided not to. He hadn't spoken to Petra since Josephina's peppermint incident. He was a little giddy and excited about the idea of playing Treus to Petra's Astra, but he was trying very hard not to let on.

Gennifer pulled her measuring tape around James' waist. "Have you read the whole script yet?" she

asked.

"No," James admitted. "I know the story a little though. Boy falls for girl. Older bloke falls for the same girl. Older bloke sends boy off on a suicide mission to get rid of him. Boy comes back and they duel. Everybody lives happily ever after. The end."

Gennifer glanced at James sardonically. "I think you'd better read the script," she said around her pins.

"I will," James said, annoyed. "I have to know my lines, don't I?"

"Yes, but you should also know that they don't 'live happily ever after'. The Triumvirate is a tragedy, you dolt."

James looked at himself in the nearby mirror. "So what's that mean?"

"Well," Gennifer mumbled, "generally, it means everybody ends up dead."

As James left Muggle Studies, Rose caught up to him.

"Did Ralph tell you what I found out last night?" she asked in a low voice.

"He said you found out why some people thought Merlin would hate Muggles," James replied, "but he didn't give me any details."

"You'll be interested in this," Rose said earnestly. "Did you ever hear of the Lady of the Lake?"

James thought for a moment. It sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place it. He shrugged and shook his head.

"Well, according to all the legends, she was supposed to have been Merlin's downfall. Most of the stories portray her as a nymph or a dryad or a sprite, but they're mostly really fanciful and probably just exaggerations of the truth. Professor Revalvier talked about it last Wizlit, remember? She said that if the legends had been true, Merlin obviously wouldn't be here as Headmaster."

"Yeah," James said, recalling the class. "She said that the stories make the Lady of the Lake out to be a sort of magical creature pretending to be all innocent and stuff. She gets Merlin to fall for her, and then, when he teaches her everything he knows, she traps him with his own magic. Obviously, it's just stories. Probably, it was all just a way to explain Merlin's disappearance. We know the truth though, like Revalvier said."

"We know a bit *more* of the truth now," Rose said enigmatically. "The Lady of the Lake wasn't made-up, but she wasn't what the legends make her out to be. She was a Muggle, and she was almost Merlin's wife."

"What?" James said, stopping in the hall. "Where'd you get that?"

"The Book of Austramaddux's Histories," Rose said, raising her eyebrows. "Same book where Zane found the account of Merlin's Disapparition last year. Morgan Patonia let me borrow it from the Ravenclaw library. Austramaddux knew Merlin better than almost anyone, although it seems to me that Merlin didn't like him very much."

"Merlin sure didn't waste any time on him when he Reapparated," James said, nodding. "It was Austramaddux's ghost who was supposed to watch for the time to be right for Merlin's return. He was bound to the job forever. I got the impression that Merlin thought Austramaddux had hurried his return just to finish his duties. It didn't go very well for him after that."

"What'd Merlin do?" Rose asked eagerly. "How do you punish a ghost?"

James shook his head. "Beats me, but Austramaddux was terrified of whatever it was. He screamed like a banshee, but Merlin just sort of… popped him."

"Very creepy," Rose said, thinking.

"Yeah, whatever. It's old news now. What's the story with the Lady of the Lake?"

"Well, according to Austramaddux, she was a Muggle peasant named Judith. She lived on a tiny farm with a little spring lake on it. That's where her name came from. The farm had been managed by Judith and her mother until her mother died. The lord of the fiefdom was a guy named Hadyn. He planned to banish Judith from the farm because she couldn't manage it on her own, but Merlin protected her. He sent away the brutes who'd come to throw her out. Apparently, he gave them donkey ears and told them if they came back he'd finish the job."

"See?" James said. "That doesn't sound like the actions of a wizard who hates Muggles. He was helping her, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but only because he loved her. The book says that Judith was really beautiful, and Merlin was completely smitten by her. Austramaddux actually said that Merlin was 'under her spell'. Pretty strong words for a wizard to use when describing a Muggle woman."

"So what happened?" James asked. "We know they didn't end up together for some reason. Maybe she double-crossed him. That could be where the legends get the story about her trapping him somehow."

Rose shook her head, her eyes sparkling. "No! Austramaddux thinks she loved him too! It was enough to get Merlin to cease his dealings with the Muggle kingdoms. He stopped hiring himself out as a magical mercenary and abandoned his throne as the Mediator between the Muggle and magical realms. Loads of people were mad about it, and lots of others were eager to step into Merlin's place. Meanwhile, Merlin safeguarded the farm that Judith lived on. He made really thick briars and thorns grow up all around the perimeter, keeping out Hadyn's brutes. Merlin even paid for the property, ten times what the farm was worth. And then, just to be safe, he started teaching Judith some magic."

"You can't just teach a Muggle magic, Rose," James interrupted. "You're either born with it or not."

Rose shook her head. "Merlin's magic is different, isn't it? He gets it as much from nature as he does from his wizarding heritage. He couldn't teach her how to find the magic inside her because there wasn't any there. Judith had no witch in her blood. But he could teach her how to use the magic in nature. A little, at least. She just needed to know enough to be able to protect herself, so Merlin taught her how to alter her appearance. That way, she could go to the markets unnoticed. She had to, because Hadyn had put a price on her capture. Things seemed to be working just fine for them, and it looked like Merlin was going to marry her. But then… well, it gets really awful."

"What?" James insisted, enthralled by the story.

"Well, they caught her, of course," Rose said breathlessly. "She got careless. The magical disguise was perfect. Nobody knew who she was at the markets in the fiefdom. But someone saw her use a little of Merlin's magic. She fixed a broken wheel on a boy's cart, just by holding the pieces together and saying an incantation Merlin had taught her. The wood knitted back together, fixing the wheel, but someone saw it happen. They told the fiefdom brutes, who were always hanging around the market. They captured Judith and took her to Hadyn in his castle."

"I bet Merlin wanted to kill them all," James said meaningfully. "I mean, she was just trying to help. What'd he do?"

"He didn't know where she was at first, but he tracked her down. He's apparently very good at that, being able to talk to the birds and creatures and trees. Hadyn knew Merlin would show up. He told the guards to let Merlin through, right into the lord's hall. Merlin didn't even waste time on the guards, though. He just put them all to sleep and stalked right up to Hadyn, demanding the release of Judith. Hadyn was all oily and slick. He told Merlin he had every intention of giving her back, but only if Merlin agreed to return the farm, remove the thorn hedge, and as a tribute of respect, double the fiefdom's lands."

James furrowed his brow. "Double the lands?"

"Everything was about land back then. The bigger a lord's fiefdom, the wealthier he was. Hadyn's plan was to use Merlin to steal land from neighboring fiefs. He also made Merlin promise to leave the fief forever and bestow his protection over the castle, which included protection from Merlin himself! Hadyn was really crafty and evil. He knew that as soon as Merlin had Judith back, he'd probably destroy the castle and everyone in it. But with Merlin's spell of protection, not only could the castle never be overtaken, Merlin himself couldn't touch a single brick or harm a single hair of anyone inside it."

"He didn't do it, did he?" James asked.

Rose nodded. "He did. He was that madly in love with Judith. He left and went out into the neighboring fiefdoms. There is no record of how he did it, but when he came back, he presented Hadyn with the deeds of enough new land to double his fief. I shudder to think how Merlin got all that land, but it had to have been scary. Lords didn't let go of land without a fight."

James frowned thoughtfully. "So did Hadyn release Judith?"

"Well, that's where the story breaks down," Rose said uncomfortably. "Austramaddux writes as if his readers already know the rest of the story. I'd guess that whatever happened, it was legend in that part of the world for a long time. Unfortunately, the legend got lost in all the myths and exaggerations in the centuries since. Either way, it looks like it ended badly. I mean, like Professor Revalvier said, Merlin's here with us now, but not the Lady of the Lake. The important thing is, this could explain why people always believed Merlin might have a grudge against the Muggle world. He was trapped by that Muggle lord, Hadyn, humiliated by him, and wasn't even able to have his revenge. To a wizard like Merlin, that's got to be enough to brew up a case of serious hate."

"Yeah, you couldn't blame him for being really angry," James agreed, "but that doesn't mean he'd hate the whole Muggle world. Just because there was one evil Muggle prat, that's hardly reason to go to war against the lot of them."

"Well, that's what some people believed," Rose said, shrugging. "But Merlin himself never actually said so. Officially speaking, he never said anything again. He was never again seen in public, and it's right after that that Austramaddux talks about Merlinus 'leaving the society of men until the time was ripe for him'. It's no wonder people have been suspicious all these centuries."

"And still are today," James said pointedly.

"That doesn't mean I agree with everything people have said about him," Rose replied quietly. "But it certainly makes one understand how Merlin might have developed a bit of a serious grudge. Love makes people do mad things."

James sighed. "I've got a plan, Rose," he admitted in a low voice. "I wasn't sure I was going to go through with it, but I am now. I need to clear Merlin's name if I can. I'm going to find out the truth about whether he is involved with those people we saw, and that horrible, er, thing in the smoky cloak."

Rose narrowed her eyes at James. "You know something about that thing, don't you?" she asked. "You're hiding something. Does it have to do with that weird pain you get in your forehead sometimes?"

"What?" James said, startled. "No! I… er, I don't feel that anymore."

"Right," Rose nodded. "You smacked your forehead and yelled in pain that day outside the Headmaster's office because you suddenly remembered the extra credit answer on your Arithmancy test."

James deflated. "Look, yeah, I still feel it sometimes. I don't know where it's coming from. But it doesn't have anything to do with Merlin, all right?"

"Scorpius says you're having bad dreams," Rose said, looking closely at James.

"Bloody hell, Rose! What's he doing, staying up nights taking notes?"

"He says you've been talking in your sleep and getting all worked up. He can't hear what you're saying, but it always seems to be the same. And it's happening a couple of times a week."

James glared at Rose, and then looked away. "Yeah, so what? I hardly ever even remember the dreams. And even when I do, they don't make any sense. There's always a voice talking, and flashing blades, and the sound of old machinery. Someone is walking and I'm following them, but I can't see who it is. And then there's water and some weird faces. So what? It's just a dream. It doesn't mean anything."

Rose rolled her eyes. "I know you well enough to know you don't believe that."

James shook his head. "Look, I don't know what it's all about. Maybe it does have something to do with the weird pain I get on my forehead sometimes. Cedric… Cedric says he can actually see a scar there. He says it glows green."

"No!" Rose exclaimed, as if she thought that was the coolest thing she'd ever heard. She leaned in, studying James' forehead. "Can you see it when you look in the mirror? Does it glow when you turn off the lights?"

"This isn't funny, Rose!" James said, backing away. "But at least it means I'm not a nutter. If Cedric sees it, then it isn't in my head."

"Yeah," Rose agreed. "Technically, it's on your head."

James grimaced at his cousin. "But the point is that this has nothing to do with how I intend to find out the truth about Merlin."

"How, James?" Rose asked seriously. "I mean, Ralph's right about one thing: if Merlin is involved with that evil plot, he's one scary character to go up against. He'd have no qualms about getting you out of the way. Let Ralph and me help you, at least."

James shook his head. "I don't need help, Rose. Sorry. It'd just get you two into trouble too if we got caught."

Rose had always been very practical. She nodded solemnly. "When are you going to do it?"

James' face grew determined. "Tonight, if I can. If everything goes right, we'll know the truth by tomorrow morning. Wish me luck."

"You'll need more than luck, you berk," Rose said. "I certainly hope you know what you're doing."

James thought of the way Merlin had found him in the halls, both when he'd been standing guard for the Gremlins and when he'd gone for the rolling chalkboard. Merlin knew when things were going on

around the school, and he'd know what James was up to if James wasn't very careful.

"So do I, Rose," James agreed as he and his cousin walked down the corridor toward the Great Hall, "so do I."

James had a simple plan. He'd talked Cedric's ghost into helping, although it had been a close thing. Cedric didn't like going into the Headmaster's office now that Merlin was occupying it, and there was some sort of boundary that prevented ghosts from entering the Headmaster's personal quarters. Still, Cedric could hover outside the windows and see when the lights went off. Presumably, Merlin slept sometime. When the lights in his quarters had been off for an hour, Cedric was to come and wake James.

James went to bed that night certain that he wouldn't sleep a wink. He was nervous about his plan, partly because he thought he might be caught no matter how sneaky he was and partly because he was afraid of what he'd discover if the plan succeeded. Every time he began to drift to sleep, he'd imagine he was hearing Cedric coming to wake him. It was silly because the ghost made no noise whatsoever unless he wanted to, so James would never hear his approach. Still, every bump and creak caught James' attention until, eventually, he drifted into a fitful sleep.

He had the dream again, but it was different this time. As always, it began with the swish and glimmer of metal blades, frighteningly close, and the rumble of ancient machinery. There was the voice, silky and ingratiating, a little maddening. It echoed so that James couldn't understand it, but occasional phrases slipped through. "Time is not yet come…," the voice said, and "The task set before you…" and "… bearer of redemption…" In the dream, James shuddered.

There was a figure walking with him, but all James could see in the darkness was a faceless silhouette. James seemed to float with the figure, as if carried by it somehow. He felt the scar on his head like a weight. Then, for the first time, light bloomed in the strange space. It emanated from the pool, green and flickering, throwing dancing ripples over every surface. The walls were stone, old and slick with moss. James had a sense of being underground, far from the light of day. The voice continued to speak as figures moved in the brightly glimmering water, like reflections from another world. The voice came from a figure in the dark corner, draped in black. As it spoke, the two faces formed in the water again, their expressions both sad and hopeful, pleading. They were clearer this time, rippling just under the water's surface: a man and a woman, younger than James' parents. James' companion gasped and dropped to kneel, crawling to the water's edge, reaching to touch the rippling surface.

"Stop," the voice commanded. "The time is not yet come. You would join them in that world, not

return them to this one. Their blood calls for payment. Only then can they cross over. But you can extract that payment. You are the one to bring about redemption, not only for them, but for all who've gone over at the will of the oppressors. You are the hand of balance. Your duty is harsh, and your burden heavy, but it is not without its rewards. You will have them back. And you will live to see the day of change. If you wish it."

"I wish it," the voice of James' companion whispered, and James whispered it as well, helpless not to. His voice made no sound at all.

He awoke, startled by some noise. The dream remained vivid in his memory so that it almost felt like he was still dreaming. He sat up in his bed and could tell by the moonlight that it was the very dead of night. Nearby, Graham slept with one arm dangling over the bed. The room was full of the silence of deep sleep.

"Cedric?" James whispered very quietly, careful not to wake anyone. He threw back his covers and slipped out of bed. There was no sign of the ghost. Perhaps he was down in the common room. James collected his wand and his glasses from his satchel and made his way to the stairs. He stopped near the doorway, noticing something strange. Scorpius' bed was rumpled but empty. James narrowed his eyes. Where was that little viper? He thought about Scorpius telling Rose he'd heard James talking in his sleep. Why had Scorpius been awake those times? He was surely up to something. Reluctantly, James determined to think about it later. He had more important things to do now. He turned and crept down the stairs to the common room.

The room was completely empty and dark except for the dull red glow of the fireplace. There was still no sign of Cedric's ghost. James whispered his name again, a little louder this time, but there was no response. James sighed and walked over to the fireplace. As he plopped into the high-back chair, a voice spoke up brightly, shocking him.

"Hey, James!" the voice said. "Where's everybody at?"

James spluttered, looking around. "What? Who… Zane?!"

Zane stood by the fireplace, apparently leaning on the mantle, although he didn't quite seem to be touching it. He grinned mischievously. "Who else? You got my duck, I see."

"Your—" James began, still recovering from the shock. "No. What? Your duck? What are you doing here?"

"I sent you a message by duck a few minutes ago," Zane said, referring to the Protean rubber ducks they used to send notes to each other. James had completely forgotten about his. "I assumed you got the message. I told you and Ralph to meet me by the fireplace in five minutes. So where's everybody else? This place is dead as a doorknob."

James rolled his eyes. "So that's what woke me up! Zane, it's the middle of the night," he exclaimed, stifling a grin. Zane's utter precociousness always amazed him. "Ralph's in bed down in the Slytherin

quarters. You forgot the time difference again!"

"Oh yeah," Zane said, grimacing. "It's only eight here. I mean, there. Where I really am. So what do you think of this? Much better than the lunarfly dust. Do I look all right?"

James squinted. "Well, you did a minute ago. You're starting to fade a bit around the edges. How are you doing it?"

"It's pretty good, eh?" Zane replied. "Another of Professor Franklyn's brainstorms. The beauty of it is its simplicity. You ever hear of a Doppelganger?"

James frowned. "Er, yeah, actually. It's a mythical double of yourself. It shows up to warn you of your own impending death, right?"

Zane nodded brightly. "Yeah, exactly. Franklyn figured if we faked the circumstances of untimely death, the Doppelganger might show up. Then, when it did, we could harness it and send it out to relay personal messages, like this one."

"So you're in mortal peril over there?" James asked, furrowing his brow.

"Yes and no. The Doppelganger has to think so, but Professor Franklyn has it all worked out. There're loads of fail-safes. I'm only technically in mortal peril. When we finish talking, I'll be in the clear again. It's all a little complicated, but the Department has worked out most of the bugs. You have your wand with you?"

"Er, yeah," James answered.

"Shoot me with it, will you? It doesn't matter how. A Stinging Hex or something. I'm starting to fade out."

"What? I mean, are you sure?"

"Totally. Make it quick. See, the problem with this method of communicating is maintaining the magic over long distances. We need a boost from your end to keep it up; otherwise, I'll just fade out."

James produced his wand and, reluctantly, pointed it at the fading figure of Zane. "Acervespa," he pronounced. A thin, needlelike bolt shot out of his wand. Zane's figure seemed to absorb the bolt. It grew suddenly solid again.

"That hit the spot," Zane said. "So how're things across the pond?"

"Ugh," James said, slouching in his chair. "Complicated. Albus is a Slytherin, I'm getting phantom broadcasts through some kind of ghost scar, the son of Dad's mortal enemy stole my bed, and everybody is worried Merlin has gone evil."

Zane grimaced. "Whoa. That's a mouthful. One thing at a time. You don't think the big guy's gone evil,

do you?"

James shook his head tiredly. "No, but some people do. Even Rose does. Especially after the other night."

James told Zane about the scene in the Amsera Certh Mirror. Zane listened critically, one corner of his mouth cinched up in his unique expression of thoughtfulness.

"So what happened then?" Zane asked once James had finished.

"What do you mean? That's it. Isn't that enough?"

"I mean, how'd Merlin get back if you shut the Focusing Book on him?"

"I don't know," James mused. He hadn't really thought about it. "But he did get back. I guess he has other means of getting around. If that was really him."

"It was him," Zane said, nodding. "You just don't want to admit it."

James frowned, but before he could object, Zane went on. "But the good news is he must have been there for all the right reasons. Otherwise, you'd be toast, wouldn't you?"

"What do you mean?" James asked warily.

"I mean, he saw you, didn't he? You said that the pale dude pointed out of the Mirror right at you, and everyone turned to look. That means Merlin saw you. If he was in league with these guys, he'd have come for you three the moment he got back. You'd all be banished to the Netherworld, or whatever it is guys like Merlin do to their enemies."

James furrowed his brow. "I hadn't thought of it that way."

"Of course you hadn't," Zane shrugged. "I was always the brains of the outfit."

James grimaced. "Well, either way, I'll know more after tonight. In fact, I thought you were my wakeup call. I've got some sneaking around to do and I'm a little nervous about it. I don't even have the Invisibility Cloak this time. So anyway, what about you? How are things at Alma Aleron?"

"You wouldn't believe it," Zane said, shaking his head. "Classes are positively huge, and the wizarding community over here is way different. There are actual Sasquatches in some of my classes. Bigfeet! And let me tell you, they're a lot smarter than they look, even if they do only talk in grunts. Also, the Progressive Element is all over the place around here, only they don't call themselves that. They just talk a lot about how the old ruling elite have always halted change and stifled progress, stuff that sounds all great until you remember that change and progress are the same things that make milk go sour. Anyway, a lot of them give me the evil eye because they think they know what happened there at Hogwarts last year. Madame Delacroix's in prison, you know. A lot of people talk like she's a

hero, like some kind of political exile. It's completely quantum to me."

"The voodoo queen's in prison?" James asked, his eyes going wide. "They have wizarding prisons there?"

"Well, it's more of a mental hospital, but it's under total lockdown. She was never really the same after that night in the Grotto Keep. She got a little cracked, if you know what I mean. Technically, she's just under observation. In fact, she's right here on campus, in the medical building. Hey, Cedric. How's the ghosting going?"

James looked up and saw Cedric moving across the room, smiling halfheartedly.

"It's time," the ghost said, addressing James.

"That's right," Zane said, "you have your big plans to spy out the Headmaster. Look, are you certain that's a good idea? That guy must have anti-spy traps all over the place. You can't just waltz into his office even if you did have the Invisibility Cloak."

"I've got a plan," James said, firming his jaw.

"Oh," Zane replied, rolling his eyes. "Well, if it's as solid as the plans we came up with last year, then I feel loads better."

"You're fading out again, mate," James said, climbing out of the chair and turning to join Cedric. "Pop up anytime you want."

"You can count on it. Good luck. And James?"

James stopped and turned. Zane was fading almost to nothing. He looked even ghostlier than Cedric.

"Keep me in the loop, you know? I was there when Merlin showed up. If he has gone to the dark side, I want to know about it. Maybe I can help."

"He hasn't," James said. "Don't worry about it."

Zane grinned. "I didn't say I was worried."

A moment later, the figure of Zane evaporated like a puff of smoke.

As they slipped through the portrait hole, Cedric asked, "What was that all about?"

James shook his head. "Just Zane being Zane. Come on, let's get this over with."

"So what do you need me to do?"

James took a deep breath and looked down the very dark, very silent corridor. "Just get me into the

Headmaster's office," he whispered. "After that, as Zane would say, it's all quantum."

James had hoped that the password to the Headmaster's staircase hadn't changed since he, Ralph, and Rose had gone to ask permission to start the Defence Club. By the time he got to the gargoyle guarding the entrance, he'd nearly forgotten the old Welsh phrase, but when he remembered it and said it aloud, the gargoyle stepped tiredly aside.

"Nothing good comes from such a late visit," the gargoyle muttered as James and Cedric passed. "But then again, what do I know? My head's made of marble."

At the top of the staircase, Cedric walked silently through the office door. A few moments later, the bolt shot back from the inside and the door creaked slowly open.

"They're all asleep," Cedric whispered, indicating the headmasters' portraits. "Even Dumbledore and Snape."

James nodded and crept into the room. The office was quite dark and foreboding despite the sound of mingled snores from the portraits. A single beam of moonlight laid a stripe across the floor, up the front of the massive desk, and across Merlin's Focusing Book. James crept across the floor toward the desk, not wishing to look at the Amsera Certh but unable to avoid it. The surface of the Mirror was thick with rolling, silvery smoke, casting its own pale light on the nearby furnishings.

"I only n-need a few m-minutes," James whispered, his teeth chattering. The Headmaster's office was unusually cold. James could see his breath puffing as he spoke. "I just need you t-to lock the door afterwards…"

There was no answer. Cedric had already gone out to the hallway to wait. He'd told James that he hated being in Merlin's office. "Too many traps," he'd explained simply, "even for a ghost."

Something white and flitting reached lazily out toward James. He jumped, and his heart lurched up into his throat, pounding wildly. It was only the linen curtains hung over the window, billowing in a sudden breeze. It was no wonder the office was so cold. Merlin had left his window open, leaving the cold night wind to play in the curtains. Through the window, James could just see the arc of the moon. It hung in the sky like a bone-colored scythe. He shivered and willed his heart to stop pounding. Trembling, he turned back to the desk.

The Focusing Book seemed to glow in the beam of moonlight. The closed cover was very thick, bound with polished wood and brass hinges. There was a lock, but it was unlatched. James touched

the book, and then quickly opened it, wanting to get the task over as soon as possible. The pages were heavy, made of a rich, creamy paper that slid easily under James' fingertips. Every page was almost entirely blank except for a single line handwritten in ink: a place and a date. James flipped through them as quickly and carefully as possible, reading each one. After a minute, an idea struck him. He flipped to the end of the book and found blank pages. Quickly, he paged backwards, riffling through the heavy, blank pages until he got to the last one with writing on it. He stopped, jabbed a finger at it and read: 'THE GRAVE OF THE SOUGHT HOST, OCTOBER'.

This was it. He hoped it would work, and yet, even now, part of him also hoped it wouldn't. He backed away from the book, his eyes wide and his heart still hammering. He could tell by the change in the lighting of the room that the Mirror had focused. There was the sound of wind creaking in trees and rustling leaves. Slowly, James produced his glasses from the pocket of his pyjamas and put them on. He didn't want to miss anything this time. Finally, he turned around.

The scene was exactly as he'd remembered. There was the grave of Tom Riddle, choked with vines and topped with the smiling, handsome statue. Daylight filtered through the trees, grey and misty. Now that James knew what to look for, he could see the creature of smoke and ash standing in front of the grave. As before, the ragged bottom of the cloak blew in the wind with no feet coming out of it. Something about the figure defied the eye, forced it away, but James made himself look at it. Was this the Gatekeeper of whom Farrigan had spoken? James felt a sinking certainty that it was. As before, it looked less like a cloaked figure and more like a hole cut in space, showing some awful infinity of swirling blackness and swarming cinders.

James waited and watched, shivering in the cold of the Headmaster's office. Outside, the wind seemed to be increasing. It pushed restlessly through the window, flapping the curtains. Finally, as James watched, the Gatekeeper raised its arm, letting the sleeve fall back. The hand was thin and pale, as it had been the first time James had seen it, and James thought he could tell that it wasn't really a human hand at all, but simply a shape meant to look like one. This time, the hand didn't beckon. It remained upraised for a long moment. And then the figure turned its head. The cloak's hood was empty, but it was obviously looking at James through the Mirror. James gasped and stepped back.

Several things happened at once: a gust of wind roared in through the window, streaming the curtains and riffling the pages of the Focusing Book, the door to the Headmaster's office was thrown wide open, slamming against the inside wall, and light poured in from the hall, revealing a large, stalking silhouette. James plunged forward, trying to hide in the shadow of the Magic Mirror.

Before James' face, the mirror glass altered as the pages of the Focusing Book riffled. Scenes flickered past, rising and falling out of the silvery smoke. Elsewhere in the office, the portraits of the former headmasters were now awake, although none spoke. The silhouetted figure stalked through the room, searching it. James had been discovered. Whoever it was would see him at any moment. James huddled, pressing his hands to the glass, panting and terrified. He wished he could be anywhere else at that very moment.

And then, suddenly, he was.

There was a horrid, disorienting sense of flipping, as if James' entire body had been turned inside out. It was over almost before he knew what was happening. Suddenly, the scene in the Mirror wasn't the silvery smoke; it was the Headmaster's office, but backwards, somehow. James could clearly see the shadow of a large man moving over the floor on the other side of the Mirror, and then the man himself walked into view, very close. It was Merlin, his eyes wide and searching.

Without thinking James ducked below the surface of the Mirror. Desperately, he peered up, craning his neck to see if he'd been discovered. From this new angle, the scene in the Mirror looked different. In fact, the mirror itself was different. It was rather smaller, framed in silver, and hung on a stone wall rather than in a wooden frame. James frowned, confused and frightened. Now that he looked around, he could see he was in an entirely different place. Somehow, he'd come *through* the Mirror. When he'd wished to be somewhere else, he'd been touching the Amsera Certh, and the Mirror had apparently made his wish come true. How could he have been so careless? The Focusing Book's pages had been riffling in the wind, so there was no way to tell what page of the Book he had been sent to.

James tried to take stock of his surroundings. He was still huddled below the new mirror, hunkered in a narrow space between the wall and a sort of huge stone block. There were voices nearby. Very carefully, James raised his head. The block was about three feet high with an enormous, complicated shape rising out of it. With a start, James realized it was a statue. It looked vaguely familiar, although it was hard to tell from this angle. James peered around a monstrous carved foot, trying very hard not to breathe. The voices were very close by, and as James peered, he finally saw the owners of the voices. There were four people, all dressed in robes and cloaks of various colors. They were facing away from James, forming a rough line. Suddenly, there was a blinding flash and a puff of acrid smoke.

"One for the ages, methinks," a hearty voice cried. "A pity it won't be in color."

"Color will come soon enough, Godric," a woman's voice trilled happily. "And perhaps even movement, like little living paintings."

"We already have moving paintings," a second man's voice said with a hint of a sneer. "I fail to see how this process is in any way superior."

"Always the skeptic, Salazar," a different woman's voice commented. "Rowena's inventiveness should be lauded, not criticized. Leave that to the apprentices whose work it is to refine her technique."

James' eyes nearly bulged out of his head. Now that the photo had been taken, the four individuals were gravitating toward the rotunda exit. Nearby, a small, grizzled goblin was extinguishing the flash mechanism while another goblin disassembled a gigantic, ancient camera. As the two women and two men walked out into the sunlit hall, James looked up at the high archway. There, carved carefully in

the stone at the peak of the arch, each letter as sharp as the chisel that had cut it, were the words: 'SCHOLA HOGVARTENSIS ARTIUM MAGICARUM ET FASCINATIONUS'.

James slumped back against the wall as the voices faded. There was no doubt about it. Somehow, impossibly, he had been hurled back in time to the founding of Hogwarts. He was in the old rotunda, hiding under the intact statue of the founders, as the founders themselves walked into the light of a thousand year old sunset. But what struck James as the most absurd thing of all was that Ashley Doone had been right that day in History of Magic.

James was the ghost in the plinth.

10. The Beacon Stone

James waited until the goblins finished disassembling the handmade camera equipment, loaded the pieces onto a rough cart, and wheeled it away, talking the entire time in a strange goblin language. When they were gone and the rotunda was empty, James jumped up. He peered into the silver-framed mirror, wondering why anyone would hang a mirror behind a statue. The mirror showed merely the shadowy backsides of the statues and James' own face, which was rather wild-eyed. His glasses were askew. He whipped them off and stuffed them into his pyjama pocket. For a moment, he was filled with a horrible panic. The Mirror-portal had closed! How would he ever get back? But then, as he placed his hands on the surface of the mirror glass, the reflection changed. Merlin's office leapt into view, as if summoned by James' touch. Candles had been lit and Merlin stood at his desk, his back to the Mirror. He was turning the pages in the Focusing Book. He seemed to sense James' gaze, for he suddenly turned his head, peering back at the Mirror, his eyes sharp. James leapt aside, throwing himself against the stone wall next to the mirror. The moment his fingers left its surface, however, the reflection changed back to normal; the Headmaster's office winked away, replaced by the reflection of the enormous statue and the rotunda.

James breathed a huge sigh of relief. All he needed to do was to wait until Merlin left his office again. Then, James could simply touch the mirror on this side and wish to go back to his own time. Hopefully, he'd be sent back through the Amsera Certh again. Once he got back, he'd still have to escape the Headmaster's office undetected, but he'd work that out when the time came. Quietly, James hunkered down behind the statue plinth and leaned against the wall.

Now that he had calmed down a bit, James began to notice the noises and smells of this ancient version of Hogwarts. The rotunda itself was empty, but the rest of the castle sounded like a hive of activity. Voices echoed, overlapping and busy. There was the sound of footsteps and even the clatter of hooves on stone. Clanks and hisses indicated a nearby kitchen. The smells were a mingled potpourri of stew and plowed earth, sawdust and animal dung. James found that he was curious. If he had to wait anyway, was there any reason he shouldn't explore the original Hogwarts a little? Rose would probably punch him if he didn't take advantage of the opportunity. James climbed up and peered between the enormous feet of the statue of Helga Hufflepuff. The rotunda remained completely still and empty. Cautiously, James crept out from behind the statue and crossed the room. It was just like the old rotunda in the Hogwarts he knew, except that it wasn't old; every block in the wall was straight and sharp-edged, perfectly fitted in its place. At the archway, James turned back and looked

at the statue. He'd often wondered what it had looked like before it was broken. The stone figures of the founders were each twenty feet tall, all smiling except for the statue of Salazar Slytherin, which seemed to smirk slightly, the eyes narrowed. On the wall behind them, above the silver-framed mirror, was a gigantic Hogwarts crest fashioned from wood and painted brightly. The overall look was quite imposing.

"Boy!" someone cried nearby. James jumped, wheeling so fast that he nearly fell on the floor.

A man in a long fur cloak was standing in the doorway of the rotunda entrance. His bushy eyebrows were furrowed over bright, deep-set eyes. He held the reins of a regal white horse. "Stable the packhorse and send word to your lord that his guests are arrived. We can find our own quarters if none can be bothered to greet us."

James was completely flummoxed. Not knowing what else to do, he ran over to the man and tentatively reached for the reins. The man looked him up and down suspiciously, and James remembered that he was dressed in blue- and white-striped pyjamas.

"Not the steed, boy," the man growled. "No one handles this beast but myself. *Your* charge is yonder packhorse." He pointed out over the portico to a huge packhorse laden with canvas burdens. Hitched to it was a cart with thick, wooden wheels. The man leaned toward James threateningly. "Are you a stable boy or a jester? What manner of reception is this?"

"Er, sorry sir. No problem," James stammered. "I can handle your horse, uh, Sire. Master. Er, Your Highness."

The man's face suddenly spread into a toothy grin, as if he thought James was mocking him and was pleased to plan his comeuppance. "Amusing, boy. Your lord will surely enjoy the joke as much as I do. See to it that our baggage is brought to our quarters, and I'll personally strop the porter who proves careless. Spread the word."

With that, the man flung the reins of his steed over the nearby hitching post and strode into the dimness of the castle, his furs swaying. He left a strange, spicy scent behind him. James turned back to the enormous packhorse and the wagon. He considered simply running away now that no one was watching, but then thought better of it. Surely, he could at least lead the horse to the stables. All he'd have to do was follow his nose. Besides, the task would allow him a view of the original castle without looking too conspicuous. First though, he needed something else to wear. He looked around quickly. Instead of the weedy hilltop of James' time, the rotunda entrance overlooked a carefully cropped courtyard surrounded by a low fieldstone wall. Running across the center of the courtyard was a babbling stream, fed through stone gates on either side. There, sitting on a large boulder near the stream, were three baskets of clothing. James ran over, hoping whoever was doing the washing would stay away a bit longer.

The contents of the baskets were very rough robes, much larger than James could comfortably wear. He struggled into one anyway, trying to roll up the enormous sleeves. The bottom of the robe pooled

around his feet comically. The robe was better than his stripy pyjamas, but not by much. Perhaps he'd find something better later. He turned and ran back to the packhorse, holding up the robe to avoid stumbling over it.

He took the reins of the horse, which was easily twice his height. The horse continued to crop the grass of the courtyard, chewing methodically, but it followed amiably as James tugged the reins. The wheels of the wagon creaked as the horse pulled it. James didn't know where he was going, but he assumed if he walked around the castle he'd eventually come to the stables. He took the opportunity to look around.

Hogwarts castle was much smaller than he knew it in his time. It huddled around the rotunda entrance, which was festooned with a great iron portcullis, currently raised. The turrets gleamed in the sunset, their conical roofs looking sharp enough to prick James' finger. Much higher than the turrets was the Sylvven Tower, which James knew well. It looked exactly the way he remembered it, although in this time it dominated the silhouette of the entire castle. As James circled the castle, leading the horse through a rough stone gate, he noticed that the land around the castle was dotted with farms and cottages. James was a little surprised. In his time, Hogwarts castle stood alone in a large, forested wilderness, secluded and hidden. Here, however, the castle overlooked a bustling community. People moved busily all around, obviously consumed with the business of peasant life. As James led the horse and cart, trying to look like he knew where he was going, he passed people carrying baskets and pots, herding sheep and cows, or pushing wooden handcarts laden with vegetables. Several people shot James careful looks, and at least one woman laughed, but at least no one was accosting him or demanding to know what he was doing.

Finally, James caught the scent of fresh animal dung on the shifting breeze. He looked and saw a huge stone barn. He grinned, recognizing it; it was the same barn that Hagrid, in James' time, was currently holding Care of Magical Creatures in. The roof was different, and there was something like a blacksmith's shed attached to the side, but it was otherwise unchanged. As James approached, he heard the stamp and whicker of horses and the clang and hiss of the smith.

"What's all this, then?" a burly man with bare arms called, stepping out of the main barn door and eyeing James.

"Er, this packhorse needs stabled," James replied, holding up the reins. "The owner sent me here. I'm not really a stable boy."

"That I can tell," the man said gruffly, scowling, "seeing as you've brought me yonder horse without even releasing its cart. Perhaps you expect me to stable it as well?"

"No!" James replied. "It's supposed to be unloaded and taken to the owner's quarters. He said he'd… er, strop anyone who wasn't careful with his stuff."

"Don't tell me how to do porter work, boy," the man said, rolling his eyes wearily. "I'd strop you myself if I had the time. Thomas! Send for the page. We need this cart returned to the valet before

Lord Maarten gets frisky."

The man looked down at James again, sighing. "You're either a thief or you're the youngest cleric I've ever seen. Your mistress will lash you good when she sees what you've done to that robe. What's your name?"

James' heart jumped, but he couldn't think of a lie fast enough. "Er, James, sir. James Potter."

"The Potter's boy, eh? Well, then, you had best run along back to the market. And tell your da that the pestle for which we traded him has got a crack on the rim. I'll send the wife down with it at the morrow."

The man seemed to dismiss James. He turned and walked back into the shadow of the barn, calling again for Thomas. James sighed in relief. Obviously, the man thought James was the son of the village pot maker. He turned and looked back the way he'd come. The landscape between the castle and the barn was completely different in this time. James could only see the flat top of the Sylvven Tower poking over a stand of birches. He began to make his way back, ducking through the carts and farm animals.

A sort of marketplace was erected around the back of the castle. Wooden stalls, benches, and carts were arranged haphazardly, each decked with all manner of goods. People thronged near the stalls, shouting and waving, bartering and arguing. Livestock mingled with the peasants, adding their own voice and smell to the scene. James darted through the fracas, trying to stay out of people's way and avoid stepping in animal dung. Bits of conversation drifted over him as he moved, and James began to sense that these were mostly Muggles, although they seemed aware of the magical nature of the castle and its inhabitants.

"This here's an authentic enchanted fork, it is," a man was saying to a skeptical-looking peasant woman. "Makes any meal taste like it is fit for a king. My Lars found it in the grass after some of the magical folk had a picnic. Only two chickens and it can be yours."

The woman scoffed and turned away. The man seemed unperturbed. He saw James looking. "What think yeh, lad? Fancy a bit o' real magic? Tell yer mam to stop on by, will yeh not?"

James shrugged and backed away.

As he entered the shadow of the castle, James spied a broad doorway. Clanks and hisses emanated from the space beyond, and James guessed by the smells that it was the kitchen. He remembered hearing the kitchen from the rotunda and decided this entrance was probably his best option for getting back to the statue and the mirror. He sauntered toward the door, trying to look inconspicuous. It occurred to him that he'd look more appropriate if he was carrying something. Near the door, a stack of copper pots sat next to a huge cauldron boiling over a fire. James glanced around, assuring that no one was looking, and then grabbed the pot on top. As he turned, cradling the pot in his arms, he heard a rattling crash. He glanced back. The rest of the pots had fallen over, the topmost one spilling water onto the fire, which hissed and sputtered.

"What's this?" a woman's voice cried, stridently. "Making off with the wares, are yeh? That's the coppersmith's lot! Thief!"

James dropped the pot and ran. He heard the ruckus behind him as the woman screamed and gave chase, but he didn't look back. He plunged into the darkness of the kitchen, weaving past a man in a leather vest and knocking over a woman carrying a platter. The kitchen was very dark but for the blaze of the brick oven. James aimed for it, and saw another doorway.

"Thief!" another voice called, joining the chorus from outside. "Stop him!"

A burly man with no shirt and a stained apron hanging from his middle stepped in front of James, grinning wickedly under his huge black mustache. He held a butcher knife in his hand, fingering it like it was a cutlass.

James tried to stop, but he was moving too fast and the stone floor was wet. He slipped, fell on his behind, and slid right between the man's spread legs. The man looked down as James passed beneath him.

"Stand fast!" the man cried, spinning. James struck the wall on the opposite side of the corridor and scrambled up. Keeping as low as he could, he bolted down the corridor. The man roared and raised the knife, but someone else grabbed his wrist from behind.

"Calm yourself, Larkin! He's just a lad. Dropped the pot outside, even," a voice admonished. "Planning to split his skull for makin' you look a fool? If that was a killin' offense, you'd have to execute the entire kitchen."

James sensed the pursuit had ended, but he couldn't make himself stop running. He came to an intersection in the corridor and was pounding straight through it when a hand snagged his wrist like a vice. James spun, momentum carrying him around, and tumbled to the floor, looking up at the figure that had stopped him.

"We do not approve of running in the halls," Salazar Slytherin said, staring down his nose at James. His fingers were still clamped on James' wrist. They were very cold. "What manner of revolt is this? A single boy?"

"I'm not part of a revolt," James said, panting. "I was just… er…"

"You are indeed revolting," Slytherin growled, slitting his eyes, "but only because of your dirty blood. How dare you cross into these halls, Muggle?"

James felt an angry response welling up in him, but with an effort of will, he quelled it. "Sorry, sir. I was… lost."

Slytherin leaned toward James, using the grip on his wrist to pull him close. "You dare look me in the eye as if you believed me an equal?" Slytherin hissed. "The soft hearts of my fellows have bred

insolence in your kind, but I will not have it. You will address me as 'Master', and you will avert your eyes, or I will have them for my collection. Is that clear, son of dirt?"

James used Slytherin's grip as leverage, pulling himself to his feet. When he was upright, he yanked as hard as he could, wrenching his wrist from the wizard's grasp.

"Blimey," James said angrily, "the history books sure got it right about you."

Slytherin's eyes blazed and his expression turned wary. He reached for his wand with one lightning quick movement. James scrambled to find his own, but it was too buried under the ridiculous robe.

"Salazar," a voice suddenly called. Slytherin froze. James whirled around, thankful for the interruption. The woman James recognized as Rowena Ravenclaw had just walked around a bend in the hall. Her eyes were suspicious as she glared over James' head at Slytherin. "We've been waiting for you. The audience with Lord Maarten is begun. How much longer do you intend to palaver with this, er, young cleric?"

Rowena dropped her eyes to James and winked, unsmiling.

James turned back to Slytherin, who glared at him furiously. Then, suddenly, his face changed. He smiled indulgently and patted James lightly on the head.

"Run along, lad," he said in a singsong voice. "I'm sure we'll have a chance to finish our 'palaver' soon enough."

James stared up at Slytherin, thinking that the wizard might simply curse James in the back as soon as he turned away. Slytherin's expression didn't change, but his eyes hardened. Go now or face the consequences, the eyes seemed to say. James risked it. He turned and walked as quickly as he could, taking a corridor at right angles to the one Slytherin and Rowena Ravenclaw occupied. It curved to the right and met a short flight of stairs. When James reached them, he looked back. Slytherin was no longer visible. Breathing yet another sigh of relief, James took the stairs two at a time.

As he navigated the corridors, he could still hear the echoing clatter of the kitchens. He had to be very near the rotunda. Nothing looked familiar however. Torches flickered and sizzled in great iron wall brackets, making shadows leap on the walls, disorienting James. He passed more people, some of them no older than he was, and assumed he was encountering some of Hogwarts' original students. They turned as he passed, their eyes curious or outright suspicious. He began to panic. Finally, as James passed a pair of older boys in green tunics, he turned, meeting their stares.

"Sorry, I'm new here," he ventured, trying to keep his voice even. "Do either of you know where the rotunda is?"

"What might you need in the rotunda, boy?" the taller one replied, showing his teeth in a parody of a charming smile. "You must know that it's time for Alchemy class."

"Perchance he doesn't know," the second boy said, his brow lowering. "His garb tells me he is a Muggle interloper. Lost, are you?"

"Or perhaps not," the darker boy suggested, advancing on James. "Perhaps you are up to something a bit more nefarious? Methinks the Head of House shall be the judge."

"No, no," James cried, throwing up his hands. "I think I've already met him! He, er, says hello!"

James spun on his heels, tripping over the oversized robe. The two boys advanced on him. One of them reached for the hood of the robe, but James finally got his footing. He lunged away, yanking away from the boy's grasp.

"Capture him!" the darker boy ordered, giving chase.

James bolted down the corridor, his heart pounding. He turned at random hallways, leaping up short stairways and ducking into doorways. After one turn, he encountered an alcove with a statue in it. To James' amazement, it was the statue of Lokimagus the Perpetually Productive. Without thinking, James shimmied into the alcove and hid behind the stooped statue.

His pursuers' footsteps echoed closer. They clattered to a halt directly in front of the statue.

"He can't have gotten far," the darker boy barked. "You go on ahead. I'll double back and make sure we didn't miss him. That Muggle brat will pay for crossing the path of Slytherin House."

James held his breath until he was sure they were gone. Finally, he clambered out from behind the statue. He checked both directions, and then darted out into the corridor again. He hoped desperately that he wouldn't encounter any more students. If he got caught now, he might never make it back to the Magic Mirror; he'd be trapped in ancient Hogwarts forever.

James crept around a large archway and gasped. There, across a broad marble floor, were the gigantic statues of the founders. He'd made it back to the rotunda! He could see the glint of the silver-framed mirror behind the statues. James trotted across the floor as lightly as possible, determining to go back through the mirror now even if Merlin was still in his office. He'd have to take his chances with an angry Headmaster and hope he'd give James a chance to explain himself. This ancient world was just too dangerous to muck about in.

Even as James was thinking this, however, something began to move from behind the statues. Someone had been standing in their shadow and was now coming out as if to meet him. James tried to stop, to duck into another hiding place, but there was nowhere to go. It was already too late. Salazar Slytherin grinned wickedly at James, triumphant. He had his wand in his right hand and carried something under his left arm. It was covered in thick black fabric.

"Imagine meeting you here, my young friend," Slytherin said smoothly. "You know, I'm beginning to think you aren't a Muggle at all. I'm beginning to think you are a spy. Very tricky of you, travelling via Mirror. I had made the mistake of believing that was impossible."

James shook his head, "It's not what you think! I just need to—"

Slytherin's voice turned icy. He held his wand up but didn't point it at James. "I can promise you one thing, though, my young friend," he said, turning, "I will not make that same mistake twice."

A bolt of white light shot from Slytherin's wand. It struck the silver-framed mirror, which exploded into sparkling bits. The pieces flew between the stone legs of the statues and pattered to the floor.

"No!" James cried, dropping to his knees. He reached for one of the shards, but it was no use. The tiny fragment showed nothing meaningful. The portal was destroyed.

"They say it's seven years bad luck to break a mirror," Slytherin commented lightly. His footsteps crunched on the bits of broken glass as he walked toward James. He grinned maliciously. "I guess that just shows what they know, doesn't it?"

James scrambled away from Slytherin, struggling to extricate his wand from the oversized robe. Slytherin stepped casually after James, shaking his head in amusement. As James finally found his wand and pointed it, the bald wizard was already flicking his. There was a sharp crack and James' wand flew out of his hand. It clattered several feet away.

"I'd thought that I was one of but two men in the earth who knew the ways of the Mirrors," Slytherin said, still advancing on James. With a deft flourish, he pulled the black cloth off the object he'd been holding under his arm. It was another mirror, small and oval-shaped, its golden frame fashioned into the shape of a coiled snake. "This one is particularly interesting, especially to someone in your predicament. No, I'm sorry to say it isn't a portal. It's a bit more… one-way."

Slytherin held the mirror so that James saw himself in it. The reflection showed a boy in a pathetically oversized robe, his eyes wild and fearful.

"Have you ever heard of the old Muggle superstition that if you stare into a reflection for too long, you'll become the reflection?" Slytherin asked smoothly, still holding the mirror toward James. "They fear that if they then walk away from the reflection, they will simply… disappear."

James had been inching slowly toward his wand, which was lying on the floor a few feet away. Now he steeled his nerve and lunged for it. An instant later, pain roared up his arm, crippling him. He fell to the floor, screaming. Desperately, he looked to see what had caused the damage, and then gasped in shock. His entire right arm had vanished up to the shoulder. He stared at the place where it should have been, unable to resist trying to grab at it with his left hand. Slytherin was laughing happily. He approached James again, and as he did, James' arm faded back into existence. The pain receded.

"There's nothing so instructive as a practical example, is there, my young friend?" Slytherin said, holding the mirror so that James could see himself in it once more. "As you've just illustrated, if you choose to stay within the reflection, you will be perfectly safe. If, however, you attempt to leave it… well, I really do not need to say any more, do I?"

Slytherin flicked his wand again. James' wand lofted into the air, turning end over end. The bald wizard caught it deftly and held it up. "Curious, this. Such a beautifully fashioned wand in the hand of a boy who barely knows how to use it. You are not a student of this establishment, and yet you seem to know us. So very many questions do I have for you. And do you know what, my friend?" Slytherin pocketed James' wand and his eyes turned narrow and icy. "I have every confidence that you will answer them."

Several minutes later, James found himself in a darkened room in Slytherin's personal chambers. The room was quite low, stone-walled, and surrounded by tapestries depicting rather unpleasant scenes of dancing skeletons and flaming mountains. Tables on both sides of the room gave James the impression that this was Slytherin's personal magical laboratory. The table on the right was laden with gigantic books, parchments, quills, and paints; the one on the left was arrayed with a mind-boggling collection of vials, jars, and pots, all arranged on stacked shelves surrounding a large cauldron. Only one candle burned in the room, blood-red and embedded in the top of a human skull. James had the distinct and unsettling impression that very few people had ever seen this room. He sat against the rear wall in a very straight chair with a high ladder-back. It was rather uncomfortable, but it was the only chair from which he could see himself in the oval-shaped mirror. Slytherin had positioned the mirror on an easel in front of the double doors, assuring that James could not approach the doors without leaving his reflection.

"As much as I would enjoy interviewing you immediately," Slytherin had explained, "I am a very busy wizard, and you've caught me at a rather bad time. Let me assure you, though: as soon as I complete my evening's appointment, you will have my full and undivided attention."

With that, Slytherin had pulled the doors mostly closed, but not completely. Through the gap, James could see a tiny portion of Slytherin's main office. As James waited, he could hear the bald wizard moving about, shuffling parchments and muttering darkly. Finally, there came a single, loud knock on the outer office door.

"How quaint of you to pretend you are not already in the room, my friend," Slytherin's voice said. "I sensed your arrival minutes ago, but I assumed it rude to say so. Please do make yourself comfortable."

Through the crack in the double doors, James saw a shadow move. A figure passed in front of the crack. There was the creak of a heavy footstep, and then a deep sigh.

"I despise the very stone of this place," a deep, rumbling voice said. "The cobbles of its floors are like knives to my feet. I'd call up the fires of the earth's belly to consume it if I could, and damn your

miserable college."

In the darkness of the laboratory, James gasped. He recognized the voice of Slytherin's visitor. It was incredible, and yet it seemed to fit all too well. How could he not have made this connection before? His heart pounded and he strained his ears to listen.

"I sympathize, Merlinus," Slytherin said. "This must be a very disquieting homecoming for you. Still, you cannot imagine that we'd have allowed this castle to go unoccupied. As you may guess, not a single Muggle lord wished to claim it after Lord Hadyn's unfortunate… accident. Ironically, they believe the castle is cursed rather than magically fortified. I join you, however, in despising much of what this place has become. My fellow founders are increasingly double-minded. They coddle the unmagicked and the dirty half-bloods. They plot against me as we speak. I fear that my time here is near an end."

"What a pitiful shame," Merlin said, his voice oozing contempt. "And you had once believed this college would be the dawn of your pureblood utopia. You must be positively heartbroken."

"My 'pureblood utopia', as you call it, will be a reality whether I assist it or not, my friend," Slytherin said. "It is the nature of things. The rulers of this world will only live among the cattle for so long before they rise up. My role in the process is insignificant, although I admit I wished to live to see the day. And do not pretend disgust at my words, Merlinus. You are the greatest proof of my claims even if you deign to ignore it."

"You believe that I detest the unmagicked as you do, but I am not so simple-minded," Merlin said dismissively. "One rabid wolf doesn't justify killing the pack. Domination is your only aim, not justice."

"Is it wrong to dominate those unworthy of equality?" Slytherin replied, as if he and Merlin had had this argument many times before. "One can make the claim that it is a kindness to govern those who are unable to govern themselves. Besides…," here, Slytherin's voice became silky, "it was more than one rabid wolf, wasn't it?"

There was a long silence, and then Merlin said, "I'll not speak of such things with you."

"Oh, but you do not need to," Slytherin replied. "Everyone knows the truth of what happened now, don't they? After all, it happened right here, four moons past. It is the gossip even of the Muggle peasants how the great Merlinus was humiliated by the Lord Hadyn and his accomplice. How it must boil your blood to know your name has become a paean to foolish love."

"I'll not speak of such things with you," Merlin repeated slowly, his voice low and dangerous.

"I'll be friend enough not to remind you that you were warned from entangling yourself with the Muggle woman," Slytherin went on, ignoring Merlin's words. "Judith, I believe her name was? Known jokingly among the peasants as the Lady of the Lake? Even I implored you not to lower yourself to her affections. Love makes a fool of any man who indulges it, and the greater the man, the

greater the fool he must become. You were a very great man, Merlinus. And yet even you were not immune. Love blinded you when your wits should have been at their sharpest. Perhaps, had you not been so enamored, you might have seen the truth."

"Hadyn gave me her corpse," Merlin growled menacingly. "He promised to return her to me. It was the bargain he agreed to if I doubled his lands and fortified this very castle. But how was I to guess that the man would dare cheat me so gravely while still maintaining the letter of his bargain?"

"He gave you a corpse," Slytherin said sorrowfully. "But you might have known it was not hers. The body was spoiled beyond recognition, but you were the great Merlin. You could have divined the truth had you tried. But you chose not to."

"She was to have been my wife," Merlin said, and his voice was like distant thunder. It rumbled the floor beneath James' feet. "I could not bear it. I could not bear even to look at that decimated body."

"And Hadyn knew such would be the case. Otherwise, how could he have dared attempt such obvious trickery? He knew you would be too stricken to verify the body was truly your Judith. And finally, when you planned your revenge, when you tracked his coach through the forest, you could have divined the truth even then. You could have used the birds and the trees to look into the coach, to assure yourself of who was inside, but you didn't. Your rage, fuelled by your love for the poor Muggle woman, blinded you, didn't it? If you had but looked, you could have known the truth. You could have saved her. For, as everyone now knows, Lord Hadyn loved Judith as well. He claimed her as his own, and she allowed him to. He gave you the body of a dead servant woman and kept Judith for himself. She betrayed you."

"She had no choice!" Merlin cried, his voice cracking.

"There's always a choice," Slytherin insisted. "She could have died for your love, couldn't she? But no, she chose to be with him instead. She chose to be with him that very day, in his coach."

"She was only human! She believed I would come for her!"

"She was only human," Slytherin agreed. "A flawed, weak, unmagicked human, despite your own pathetic attempts to teach her the arts. And then, in the name of your love-blind revenge, she was a dead human. Lost, along with her new husband, Hadyn, in a mysteriously tragic coach accident. Drowned, wasn't it? They say the storm came up with the force of Jupiter himself, washing the coach right off the bridge. It was carried quite some way, they say, and smashed to sticks. Along with every… person… inside."

"I will NOT speak of such THINGS WITH YOU!" Merlin suddenly roared, shaking the very walls. There was a flash of angry light as every candle and every flame in the fireplace suddenly exploded into a blue torch. The flame on the red candle in the laboratory erupted upwards, brightly illuminating the room for one terrifying moment. Then, as suddenly as it had happened, the moment passed. The room plunged back into darkness.

In the silence that followed, Slytherin's voice was quiet and silky. "Forgive me, my friend. I've decided it is my duty to remind you of what was taken from you, and who took it. I warned you not to trust the Muggles. They are beasts, incapable of nobility. Their only role is servitude. We are their masters. It is not only our right to rule them; it is our duty. For their sake as well as ours."

"You are a lying snake, Salazar Slytherin," Merlin seethed.

"Snake I may be," Slytherin chuckled, "but liar I am not. You are here because you agree with me, although your foolish conscience bids you not to admit it."

Merlin said, "In fact, I am only here because you have something I need."

Slytherin sighed. "Yes, I know. I have already spoken to your apprentice, Austramaddux, and for once, I agree with him. Your plan is for the best. This world is no longer yours, Merlinus. The kingdoms advance their civilizations. They parse the land and plow it; they tear down the forests and turn them into hovels. They are taming the earth, rendering it mute to you. I alone know what that does to your powers, for you are unlike other wizards, my friend. You are not a wizard at all. You are a sorcerer, perhaps the very last and best of your kind. I am glad you have accepted my suggestion to step out of this plane of existence. You will return to a better time. Austramaddux will watch for it."

"There may never again *be* such a time," Merlin said gravely. "But it matters not. You are right about one thing: this world is no longer fit for me, nor I for it. The days are darkened before my very eyes, and by my own bloody hands. I have chosen to remove myself from the realm of men, but for my own reasons, Slytherin. You would not understand them. Your heart is as dark as pitch."

"And yet it is of something dark that you've come to speak, my friend," Slytherin replied without missing a beat. "I have divined it. The stone knows when it is wanted."

"Don't mock me, Slytherin. I know you desire me to break the boundary of worlds *without* the stone, for you would then control that which returned with me."

"You speak of the legend of the Gatekeeper's Curse? You mustn't take such things seriously. My, what dreams and fancies idle men imagine, don't they?"

"I am not fooled by your guile. You have the stone, and the Darkbag, for you are a lover of such dark trinkets. If I am to do what no other man on this world is capable of doing, I will do it with the tools no other man on this world could possibly need."

"Tell me, Merlinus," Slytherin said conversationally, "what do you know of these 'trinkets'?"

"As if the stories of them were not plain enough for a child," Merlin sighed. "The Darkbag contains the last remnant of pure nothingness left from the dawn of time. Its uses are myriad and unique. The stone, however, is the only relic from pre-time. It is a single black onyx, whose origin is the Void between the worlds. It is immune to time; thus, it is the Beacon of the Gatekeeper. The holder of the stone may be granted visions of those who've passed unto death. But more importantly, he who

possesses the stone is the Gatekeeper's Ambassador, should that creature ever cross into the realm of men."

"Surely you do not believe in such things," Slytherin teased, and yet James could tell that Slytherin himself believed them fully.

"I believe that none have ever dared to test the legends," Merlin stated flatly. "But that is only because none have ever been capable of it. It is pure speculation that he who breaks the boundary between the worlds for any length of time will attract the Gatekeeper of the Void, possibly bringing it back with him. If I do it, and if I return, I wish to be the charge of anything that returns with me."

"But why?" Slytherin suddenly rasped, his voice eager and dripping with hate. "Let the Destroyer be loosed upon the earth! If man is the scourge of this world, reducing your power bit by bit, eating it up like locusts, then let the Gatekeeper be descended upon them! It is their due! If my prediction is accurate, then the realm of the wizards will have overcome the Muggles by that day. The magical kingdom will be able to defend itself against the Gatekeeper, and possibly even ally with it! Only the Muggle insects and the impure will be destroyed by its hand, and good riddance! The legend says that the Curse of the Gatekeeper will hearken a new age! An age of purity, of crystalline perfection! So let it be, Merlinus! Be the harbinger of the Curse! What more fitting way to reclaim your title as king of all wizards?"

"If I am to be the harbinger of the Curse, I wish to control it," Merlin replied calmly.

"I would have it no other way," Slytherin answered. "Without the Beacon Stone, you might not even gain the attention of the Gatekeeper. However…"

Merlin waited silently, but James, still sitting in the dark of the laboratory, could sense the great wizard simmering, his rage all but smoking off his skin.

Slytherin went on. "The stone is far too powerful to be removed from the earth entirely. Knowing this day might come, however, I have arranged for it to be split into two equal pieces. The halves have been set into two rings. One ring will go with you; the other will stay with me."

"You cannot deceive me, Slytherin," Merlin rumbled. "You wish to maintain control of the Gatekeeper upon hope of its descent. You wish to use it to exact revenge upon your enemies. You and they will be long dead by that time."

Slytherin laughed lightly. "It isn't of any consequence to you, my friend. My half of the stone will remain, regardless of my own short time upon this earth. It will be passed on. When and if you do return, signaling the descent of the Curse, the stone will find its way into the hands of my descendents. I merely wish for them to be prepared. It is only fair, don't you agree? Besides," Slytherin went on, his voice dropping, "if you do decide to abandon your course and thwart the Gatekeeper, well, are you not Merlinus the Terrible, the last of the line of Myrddred? Are you not the greatest sorcerer of all the ages? Surely, such a creature as you does not require the use of a mere 'dark trinket'."

Merlin was silent again, and James sensed him simmering. Finally, he said, "As you wish, Slytherin. Provide me my half of the stone and I will take my leave of this place."

There came the sound of a drawer opening, and then the clunk of a small box. A long silence followed.

"I could simply take both halves of the stone from you, my 'friend'," Merlin said quietly. "After all, am I not Merlinus the Terrible?"

"You forget the conditions of your lamentable bargain with Hadyn," Slytherin replied. There was the clunk of a box closing. "You are unable to touch the hair of anyone residing within this castle. Your threats are formidable, but fortunately, they are to no effect here. I do, however, appreciate the sentiment of it. You may consider it returned."

The floor creaked as Merlin stood. James saw the shadows change in the room as Merlin prepared to leave. A figure suddenly blocked the view through the opening in the double doors. It was Slytherin. He opened the doors slightly and peered in at James. A thoughtful look crossed his face. His eyes narrowed.

"And by the way, Merlinus," he said, not taking his eyes off of James, "if you do return in a future age, beware of enemies. Your disappearance will certainly be legend. Some will be looking for you, and not all will intend to welcome you."

"I am quite accustomed to dealing with enemies," Merlin's voice replied, echoing from the depths of the room beyond.

"Nevertheless, if you should come across a certain young man… brown-eyed, with short, unkempt raven hair and a look of constant insolence, beware of him. He is your enemy. I have divined it. You must dispose of him."

"I dispose of no one without just cause," Merlin growled. "Regardless of your divinations. And even those who deserve such disposal occasionally slip through my grasp."

"Whereas some who *don't* deserve it still fall under its judgment," Slytherin declared coldly, as if twisting a knife. "But suit yourself, Merlinus. Watch for the boy. Or ignore him at your peril. I care not which."

A moment later, there came a burst of warm air and a smell of dirt and growing things. Merlin was gone. Slytherin bared his teeth at James.

"You said *history* had gotten it right about me," he said, grinning viciously. "Somehow, I don't believe history will even know your name, my young friend."

11. The Circle of Nine

With a deft flourish, Slytherin threw a black cloth over the oval mirror on the easel. James cringed, fearing he'd vanish the moment his reflection was hidden. Slytherin gave him a disdainful look.

"Obviously, the mirror would be useless as a prison if the inmate could not be released by the jailor, you fool," he said. "Had you attempted it yourself, your fears would have come true, but if the mirror is covered by someone else, you are safe. You see? Even now, I am the consummate teacher, and you the reluctant pupil. Come to me, my friend."

James shook his head, pressing his lips together stubbornly.

Slytherin sighed wearily. "I'm not going to hurt you, boy. I merely require you to stand with me so that we may Disapparate together."

"You can't Disapparate inside Hogwarts," James replied. "Everybody knows that."

"I don't know who this 'everybody' is that you speak of, but I am beginning to suspect that the Hogwarts you believe you know is not the Hogwarts we currently occupy. Now come here."

James tightened his grip on the arms of the ladder-back chair. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You wish to get to the bottom of this misunderstanding, do you not?" Slytherin asked. "We both want the same thing, my young friend. Now come."

As Slytherin said the last word, he flicked his wand. The ladder-back chair leapt off the floor, taking James with it. It soared toward Slytherin, and then dumped James onto the floor in front of him. James scrambled to his feet, staring angrily up at the bald wizard.

"Why don't you just Imperio me, you big bully?" James spat.

"That is an Unforgivable Curse," Slytherin said, tilting his head in mock dismay. "I am a teacher at this fine establishment. As such, I obey the law of the land. I may not always agree with those laws, but nonetheless..."

Slytherin held out his hand.

James stared at it, frowning furiously. He knew that if he didn't obey Slytherin, the man would just force him to comply somehow. Something inside James determined that he'd rather walk into whatever awaited him than be carried to it. With that, he looked up into the wizard's cold eyes, and then took the proffered hand.

There was a sudden, dizzying sense of speed and darkness. The floor seemed to fall away from James' feet. A split second later, another surface materialized beneath him. James stumbled on it, and Slytherin let him go with a shove, driving him to his knees.

"No Disapparition," Slytherin said scornfully, stalking away. "No useful spells, no understanding of cunning or resourcefulness. I know not where you come from or who you are, my young friend, but whoever sent you must have been truly desperate."

James collected himself and stood, struggling with a sort of residual dizziness. Wherever Slytherin had taken him, it was very dark and cool. Wind blew fretfully, pushing a rafter of clouds overhead. The moon seemed unusually close. Its frosty glow illuminated the round, recessed floor of this strange place. James glanced around. The space was circular, with stone terraces leading down to a central wooden floor. On either side of this, two marble thrones faced each other. James' heart sank. He'd been here once before, in his own time.

"You seem to know much about us," Slytherin said, raising his voice over the moan of the wind. "Therefore, you must know the purpose of the Sylvven Tower. Its height, they say, places it outside the realm of the laws of men. Here, there is no such thing as an Unforgivable Curse. Here, my young friend, anything can happen."

As if to emphasize Slytherin's point, there was a sudden hiss and swirl of black smoke. It seemed to stream onto the tower, coalescing on a point to Slytherin's right. It formed the shape of a man in a black cloak. He was hoodless, with sharp features and cruel eyes. Slytherin smiled, not taking his gaze from James. More swirls appeared, hissing into shape, forming figures all around the circumference of the tower's top terrace. Every figure wore a black cloak, their heads uncovered. Each newcomer turned to look at James, their faces cold and calculating.

"Meet my Circle of Nine!" Slytherin cried, throwing his arms wide. "Fellow wizards who, like myself, recognize the inevitable future of the magical world, and who join me in fomenting it. Consider yourself honored to witness this, boy, for few alive know of us, or could guess at the counsels we keep. And now, let the summit begin! I have convened us this night because we have very important business to attend to…"

Shockingly, Slytherin suddenly flitted across the top of the tower, soaring, his feet not touching the ground and his robes flapping like leathery wings. He stopped directly in front of James, towering over him, his eyes fierce and intent. "You are that business," he rasped gleefully. He studied James' face triumphantly, almost lovingly. Then, suddenly, he turned away. His feet touched the ground again

and he walked casually out onto the wooden floor of the center of the tower. James saw that the trapdoor in the center of the floor was closed and locked. There'd be no escape that way.

"A moment ago, down in my quarters, I was the teacher and you were the pupil, boy," Slytherin said, looking out over the low wall that surrounded the tower. "Let us now reverse those roles. My friends and I wish to learn much from you tonight. You have the honorable task of teaching us. Let us start with something simple. What is your name?"

James felt a strong urge not to answer. If he answered even the most basic question, he feared he would answer all of them. Some latent idea of braveness and nobility insisted he remain silent no matter what Slytherin or his cronies did to him.

"You are thinking it is courageous to remain silent, my boy," Slytherin said slyly, looking back at James over his shoulder. "You are thinking we will not merely kill you and use our arts to extract what we wish from the meat of your dead brain. You are thinking that such things do not happen to brave little boys. And this proves to me, my young friend, that you are indeed unfamiliar with this age. I know not what happens in the time from which you come, but here, terrible things happen to little boys every single day. Moreover, you are unknown here. You are a stranger. No one knows who you are, or even that you exist. If you disappeared, none would look for you. None would so much as notice your absence. Knowing that, do you really wish to stake your life on the hope that I, Salazar Slytherin, might be too soft-hearted to execute you this very night?"

James met Slytherin's eyes. They glittered in the moonlight like coins. There was no soul in them. In them, James could very well see his own death.

James swallowed, and then stood up straight. "My name is James," he declared, trying very hard not to betray his fear.

"See how easy that was, James?" Slytherin asked, gesturing grandly. James saw that the wizard had his wand in his hand. He flicked it, almost casually, and a bolt of stunning, excruciating pain rammed down James' spine. He arched his back and stumbled backwards, landing on the stone terrace. The agony was monumental. In it, James forgot where he was. His vision went white and hazy. All that mattered was that the pain should stop. It seemed to last hours and days. Then, suddenly, it was gone, and James knew that it had been mere seconds. His eyes cleared and he saw Slytherin standing over him, smiling with interest.

"I did not do that because you only answered the question partially," Slytherin said. "I did that because you hesitated. I trust you won't let it happen again."

Slytherin spun, as if to address everyone present. "And now, loud enough for us all to hear, what is your full name?"

James struggled up, grunting. His knees felt watery and very weak, but he got them beneath him. "James Sirius Potter," he answered, hating himself for it. The thought of that pain striking him again was horrid. He'd do almost anything to avoid it. And besides, he thought, what did it matter? What

could Slytherin do with any information James might give him? It was a thousand years in the past, wasn't it?

But the future is built on the foundation of the past, a voice seemed to whisper in James' ear. He thought it was the voice of his father. Be careful, James. Be shrewd.

"James Sirius Potter," Slytherin said. "Such an innocent sounding name. Where are you from, Master Potter? When is your time? What can you tell us of it? Pray, leave nothing out."

"I'm from the future," James said grimly. "A thousand years from now. I am a student at this school in that time."

"Amazing," Slytherin said, his voice eager. "And yet this is obviously a lie. I credit your boldness, but it will not serve you well. Answer me truthfully this moment or face the Cruciatus Curse again. What say you?"

"It is the truth," James replied, raising his voice. "If you want me to make up something to suit what you want to hear, just let me know. I'll be happy to tell you whatever story you want."

"Do not tempt us, James Sirius Potter. If, indeed, Hogwarts College exists a thousand years from now, then it exists in a day when the magical realm has finally subjugated the Muggle hoard. There would be no room in such a college for a student like yourself, a boy of obviously dull abilities and mental weakness. Such a college would put you out where you belong: with the Muggle cattle and half-blood dogs. Tell us the truth now, or die with your lies."

"I'm *not* lying!" James said, growing bold. "Your predictions don't come true! In my time, the Muggles live alongside the magical world. They don't even know about us! The wizarding world has lived in secrecy among them for centuries. There are laws that make sure no witch or wizard tells any Muggle about us. Not only am I a student a Hogwarts, some of my classmates are the children of Muggles. In my time, any witch or wizard can attend Hogwarts, no matter who their parents are. Your stupid plans are going to come to nothing! In fact, in my time, you're best known for getting kicked out of the school because you were a mad, power-hungry loon!"

"You lie!" Slytherin roared, wheeling on James and raising his wand. "You have come here to sow deceit and doubt, but you are found out! You have not the slightest shred of evidence that this time you speak of is true, and the evidence of our very beings proves you false. The wizarding realm could never sink into the shadows of the Muggle world. It would be a blasphemy and a mockery. If this age that you describe were a reality, it would collapse under the weight of its own absurdity!"

Slytherin turned again, his robes flapping in the wind as he raised his arms. "My friends! We are confronted with a mystery. If the world this James Sirius Potter describes is, in some version of the shifting mists of the future—and against all logic—a reality, then it must be prevented at all costs. And if, as I strongly suspect, this boy is a fraud and a liar, flying in the face of our every attempt to consort with him as gentlemen, then he is our mortal enemy. Either way, our course is clear…" Here, Slytherin whipped around again and glared at James. "The boy must die," he said, grinning viciously.

He raised his wand.

Without thinking, James ducked and leapt as Slytherin called the words of the Killing Curse. The bolt of green sizzled over James' head. He scrambled down to the lowest terrace and hid behind one of the two stone chairs.

"Stay your wands," Slytherin called to his associates, unperturbed. "I can manage the boy. None of you need bother yourselves."

James wished desperately that he still had his wand. An idea occurred to him and he called out. "Hey! You call yourself a gentleman? Not much nobility in cursing a kid, is there? At least give me my wand!"

Slytherin laughed in delight. "Finally, the boy shows some spirit," he cried. "As you wish, Master Potter. Let us duel. Come forth and collect your wand."

James peered cautiously around the side of the throne. Slytherin saw him and his grin widened. He produced James' wand from his robes and held it out. James steeled himself and climbed to his feet again. He began to cross the wooden floor toward Slytherin, carefully and quickly, his heart pounding.

Suddenly, surprisingly, there was a loud thump from directly beneath James' feet. He jumped, startled, and looked down. He was standing on the trapdoor.

"They come, Salazar," one of the cloaked wizards said. "They have sensed our summit. We must depart. Deal with the boy elsewhere."

"No," Slytherin said, still grinning. "They cannot reach us. The tower cannot be breached from outside by any means until the summit is ended. It is the magical law of the Sylvven Tower. Let us finish our work first, and then deal with my fellow founders. It is high time they realized the error they have made in plotting against me."

Voices emanated from below and there was another thump on the thick wood of the trapdoor. The magical lock rattled but held firm.

"Take your wand, James Potter," Slytherin said. "Let us finish this as wizards."

James firmed his resolve and stepped off the trapdoor. He'd heard the stories of how his father had faced off against Voldemort in very similar fashion. But as James had thought so many times before, he was not his father. James had no chance against the sheer malevolent power of Salazar Slytherin. Worse, there was no place to run or hide. The tower was too high to escape from. James didn't even know how to Disapparate. Shakily, he reached up for his wand. Slytherin released it, still smiling.

James cleared his throat as he backed away, holding his wand in front of him. "Do we bow first?" he asked.

"I bow to equals," Slytherin said, baring his teeth. "You may bow when you're dead." He swept his arm forward. "Avada Kedavra!"

James leapt again and the spell struck the throne with a blast of green sparks. A small, detached part of James' mind realized that he was making very good use of the physical techniques he'd learned in Professor Debellows' Defence Against the Dark Arts class. He almost groaned aloud.

"Use magic, not acrobatics, boy!" Slytherin taunted, shaking his sleeve back. "Let your corpse be the first thing my fellow founders see when they join us here! Face me and die with a shred of honor!"

James was terrified. He rolled on the wooden floor and scrambled up, waving his wand wildly. He pointed it, desperately trying to remember the incantation. It was one of the first he'd ever learned, but his mind was a complete blank.

"That's more like it!" Slytherin rasped, striding forward, coming to meet James. He held his wand casually before him, teasing James with it. "Do your worst, boy! Show me what they teach you in this fantasy time of yours! Do it now!"

James blurted the spell the moment it came into his head. Slytherin spoke his curse at exactly the same time. Both bolts exploded over the wooden floor, lighting it. Slytherin's green bolt pierced James' oversized robe, passing right through it and under James' outstretched arm, barely missing his body. James' yellow bolt struck the lock on the trapdoor. It unlocked with a burst of sparks and the door flew open, releasing a beam of light and the sound of voices.

"It's open!" someone cried. "Someone unlocked it from above! Beware a trap! Protego!"

Slytherin roared in fury. He pointed his own wand at the door, but it was too late. Figures ran up the stairs from below, wands at the ready. Spells exploded in all directions, illuminating the tower's peak like fireworks. James took the opportunity to dive behind the marble throne again. The air was suddenly full of the hiss and swirl of Slytherin's circle of nine Disapparating from the top of the tower. One of them remained long enough to approach James, flourishing his wand. He had a black goatee, which bristled as the man grinned.

"Nice trick, boy," he growled, "but we detest unfinished business."

James' reflexes had been sharpened by his duel with Slytherin. Even as the man finished speaking, James whipped his wand around and shouted, "Expelliarmus!"

There was a sharp crack and the man's wand shot from his hand, spinning into the darkness beyond the tower wall. The force of the spell pushed the man backwards. He stumbled and tripped on one of the terraces. With a roar of anger, he spun to see where his wand had gone. Realizing it was lost, he turned back, his hands hooked into claws and his face contorted with rage.

"Stupefy!" James cried, scrambling backwards, but his aim was off. The spell struck the stone floor to the man's right.

"You'll die for that, boy!" the man roared, pouncing like a beast.

There was a flash of purple light and the man screamed in mid-pounce. He landed hard in front of James' feet, bringing his face down hard enough to break his nose. James heard the crunch and grimaced. He scrambled to his feet, eyes wild, waving his wand crazily.

"Halt, boy!" a voice commanded. A hand suddenly grabbed James' wrist, bringing it up. James struggled against it for a moment, and then looked to see whose hand it was. Godric Gryffindor's stern, narrow features looked down at him.

"The battle is over, my friend," he said, releasing James' wrist. "Whoever you are, you are one extremely fortunate young wizard."

"He's not just a wizard," a woman's voice said, and there was a hint of an amused smile in it. James looked and saw Rowena Ravenclaw throw back the hood of her blue cloak. "He's the youngest cleric in the realm. And he's tussled with Salazar before."

"Where's he gone?" James suddenly asked, looking around the top of the tower.

"Vanished," Ravenclaw answered gravely. "Escaped. Assumed his true form and flown off."

"What's his true form?" James asked, shuddering as his adrenaline wore off.

"Rowena speaks facetiously," Helga Hufflepuff replied, approaching the tower's low wall and peering out into the darkness beyond. "Slytherin is an Animagus. She speaks of his animal self as his true form since she believes him unworthy of the title of human."

"Is he a snake?" James asked, joining Hufflepuff by the wall and peering down.

"Curiously, no," Gryffindor answered. "Salazar's true form is perhaps even more fitting, for he has proven himself to be similarly blind, nocturnal, and bloodthirsty. Salazar's Animagus is, in fact, a bat."

A groan reminded the assembly of the stricken man with the goatee. He rolled onto his back and struggled to sit up, one hand clapped over his nose.

"This man is no danger without his wand," Gryffindor said, "thanks to our quick-thinking friend here." To the man, he said, "I'd not attempt to Disapparate if I were you, Lord Morcant. That was more than a Bonelock Hex I cast on you. It was also a Lanyard Charm. You'd get no further than a stone's throw before being leashed, and I am told it can be rather painful."

"You broke my nose!" Morcant cried, showing them the palm of his hand. It was slick with blood. "I'll kill the lot of you! Return me my wand this instant!"

"I think not, my lord," Ravenclaw replied. "I suspect you won't hold a wand for quite some time. We

have many questions for you, and it'd be best if you answered them."

"You'll torture me, will you?" Morcant spat, climbing to his feet. "I'm not afraid of what you'll do to me! I'll never speak. Do your worst!"

"We won't need to torture you," Hufflepuff said reasonably. "If you choose not to answer our interrogations, we shall simply let you go."

Morcant narrowed his eyes. "How dare you mock me? I know your kind! Your lies do not deceive me!"

"You know your kind, Morcant," Ravenclaw corrected politely, "and you assume everyone else is of like mind. We shall indeed release you if you refuse our questions, and we shall not harm a single hair on that fetching beard of yours. You should beware however; your release might result in some people getting the wrong impression. Some observers might interpret your unscathed release as a sign that you told us absolutely everything you know."

Gryffindor arched an eyebrow meaningfully. "Your associate, Salazar Slytherin, would not appreciate that, would he? He has been known to deal rather harshly with those who betray him."

"He would not believe such lies," Morcant scoffed. "He knows I am trustworthy. Besides, I am not afraid of him."

Gryffindor approached Morcant and leaned toward him. In a conspiratorial tone of voice he said, "I hear rumours that Salazar's been developing a curse that turns his enemies inside out. Technically, I'd say that was impossible, but Salazar is quite the genius when it comes to such things. Knowing him, he'll simply continue practicing it until he gets it right. He's probably hoping you'll betray him, just so he has an excuse to use you as another test subject."

"He'll trust me!" Morcant insisted again. "He knows I would never betray him!"

Ravenclaw shrugged. "Salazar never struck me as the trusting type," she said, "but perhaps you know him better than we do."

"On the other hand," Hufflepuff mused, "if you do decide to assist us, we could protect you from any potential reprisals."

Morcant scoffed, and James heard desperation in the man's voice. "You? Slytherin has twice the power of the rest of you combined!"

Gryffindor smiled. "I'm certain he has convinced even himself of that. But why, then, did he transform into a flying rodent the moment he witnessed our approach? Why did he flee rather than face us wand to wand? Slytherin does not ask himself such questions, but it behooves you, Lord Morcant, to think about it very carefully."

Morcant scowled furiously. Finally, through gritted teeth he said, "He means to overthrow the lot of you. He wishes to control the school entirely, and use it as the seed of a magical empire. He knows you have been plotting against him. His intent is to strike first."

"How instructive," Gryffindor said grimly. "He believes we have been plotting against him. But do let us continue this elsewhere. Rowena, Helga, perhaps you might escort our mysterious young friend back down to the main castle? I will accompany Lord Morcant to a safe place. We can palaver there at our leisure."

Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw agreed. A moment later, there was a loud crack as Gryffindor Disapparated from the tower with Lord Morcant in tow.

"Let us retire to the Great Hall," Ravenclaw said, turning to James and Hufflepuff. "It should be deserted at this time of night. Perhaps our friend would like something to eat as we discuss?"

Hufflepuff nodded. "Indeed. We must determine who you are, young man. And how to return you from whence you came."

"I can't imagine how we'll do that," James replied, remembering the shattered portal mirror. "My only way home was smashed to bits by Slytherin. I'm stuck here."

"Surely this is not the case," Ravenclaw said cheerfully. "It may not be immediately apparent, but the solution shall present itself."

Hufflepuff smiled at James. "The answer is almost always simple, young man, but rarely is it easy."

James had begun to walk toward the open trapdoor, but he stopped when Hufflepuff said that. Where had he heard that before? A moment later, he remembered. Merlin had said something like it in the cave when they'd gone to get his cache. Doing what is right is nearly always simple, Merlin had said, but it is *never* easy. And then, connected to that, James remembered something else the big wizard had said, later, when they'd all been in the Headmaster's office, examining his unpacked devices and curiosities.

James turned on the spot, his eyes wide, wondering. It couldn't be that simple, could it? He had to find out, and quickly.

"No," James said excitedly, "not the Great Hall. We have to go back to Slytherin's quarters! Right away, before he comes back!"

Ravenclaw furrowed her brow. "Why in the earth should we go there?"

"And what makes you think he shall return?" Hufflepuff added, studying James' face.

"Because he'd never leave all his stuff," James answered quickly. "His 'dark trinkets'. They're too important to him. He'll come back for them, probably right away, before anyone moves any of it. We

have to get there first. If I'm right, he has something really important. It may be my only chance of getting back to my own time!"

Ravenclaw merely studied James, her eyes serious and thoughtful. Helga Hufflepuff, however, nodded curtly. She stepped forward, and held out her hand.

"In that case, dear boy, let us forego the stairs. Rowena, wand at the ready. If we intend to hurry, then let us hurry like witches, and hope that Salazar has not already outwitted us this night. On the count of three. One… two…"

"Three!"

James felt the disorienting jolt of Disapparition again as Hufflepuff took him away from the Sylvven Tower. A moment later, a dim hallway appeared around him and his feet hit the stone floor. Almost instantly, there was a second loud crack and Rowena Ravenclaw appeared next to James and Hufflepuff. Both women had their wands out. They scanned the hall in both directions. Without a word, Hufflepuff pointed. James looked. He recognized this hall as the one that led to Slytherin's quarters. Now, with a shiver, he saw that the door to the wizard's office was ajar. Light spilled from it, and there was the clunk of stealthy movement.

"What is your name, young man?" Hufflepuff whispered, not taking her eyes from the door.

"James Potter," James replied as quietly as he could.

Hufflepuff whispered, "You were right, James. Salazar is here, returned for his cache, as bold as brass. He knows his time is ended here. Rowena and I will face him and attempt to reason with him. If we prevail, we will help you seek what you need. If we are bested, then I am glad to die knowing the name of our mysterious benefactor."

"You may reason with him if you wish, Helga," Ravenclaw said quietly, obviously anxious for a fight. "But I will be negotiating with my wand alone. The sheer bravado of his returning this night, beneath our very noses!"

"I want to come with you," James whispered, raising his wand. "This is my fight too. He tried to kill me!"

Ravenclaw narrowed her eyes at James, smiling thinly. "He may well finish what he started if you accompany us, James Potter. But it is your choice."

James had expected a bit more resistance than that. He smiled a little nervously. Honestly, he thought, what was the worst that could happen? History proved that all four founders survived this night. Of course, as Slytherin had implied earlier, history didn't say anything whatsoever about a dark-haired boy who might have been along for the ride.

"I'll lead," Hufflepuff whispered, pointing toward Slytherin's door. "Rowena, to my left. James, you follow. *Stupefy* Salazar if necessary, but no more. Remember that he is still one of the founders of this college, and deserving of respect."

"Respect be damned the moment he raises his wand," Ravenclaw muttered as they inched down the hall.

"He sure wasn't using Stunning Spells on the tower," James whispered. "Just watch for—"

A bolt of green seared the floor next to Ravenclaw's foot.

"Stupefy!" Hufflepuff shouted, aiming her wand at the open door. A shadow leapt aside as her spell struck the lintel, exploding into red sparks. "He's wary of us! We must charge him! We're too vulnerable here!"

James struggled to catch up as Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff ran toward Slytherin's doorway, heads down and wands firing. Red bolts peppered the doorway, forcing Slytherin back.

"Cease this, Salazar!" Hufflepuff shouted. "It is not yet too late to abandon this course of action!"

James still had seen nothing of his former captor. As they drove through the door of his office, ducking for cover behind chairs and a bookcase, a shadow escaped into a dark doorway, hissing angrily.

"Ware his form!" Ravenclaw cried. "He can be small and winged. He may hide!"

Hufflepuff peered from around the bookcase, her wand ahead of her.

"He is not in sight. To the inner chamber."

James followed the witches as they moved across the room. He was amazed at their movement. It was graceful and flitting, remarkably quick but utterly controlled. Their wand hands preceded them, steady as stone. James' heart slammed in his chest, making his own wand shake in his hand. He glanced aside as he passed the double doors of the laboratory. They were still slightly open, but the space beyond was dark.

"Sweep the room," Ravenclaw said as she moved into Slytherin's inner sanctum. "Ravaelio!"

A beam of soft lavender light spread from the tip of Ravenclaw's wand, lighting the wall. Slowly, she moved it all around the room, letting the light touch every surface. Finally, she lowered her wand,

extinguishing the lavender light.

"He is not hidden here," she said, obviously disappointed. "He has fled once again, methinks."

James finally took a moment to look around. This was obviously Slytherin's sleeping quarters. It was surprisingly small and cluttered, with gothic pillars and buttresses all round it. A single window was securely closed and locked.

"Let us take advantage of the moment, then," Hufflepuff said, turning to James. "What is it that you believe Salazar might have in his possession? What tool might prove helpful to you?"

James tried to explain the age he'd come from, and how he'd arrived in this century by accidentally wishing himself through the Magic Mirror in the Headmaster's office. He described appearing through the smaller silver-framed mirror hung behind the rotunda statue and its subsequent destruction by Slytherin.

"I assumed that *that* had been a Magic Mirror as well," James said. "But now I don't think so. Slytherin loves things like that; he'd never destroy something really magical just to keep me here. I think the Amsera Certh Mirror can see through any mirror, maybe even anything that reflects! So the mirror behind the statue was just a normal mirror after all."

"That mirror was a remnant from Hadyn's occupation," Ravenclaw nodded. "There'd be nothing magical about it."

"But Slytherin knew all about travelling through Mirrors," James went on. "He said that he thought he was only one of two men on earth who knew about that. And then, just now, when we were up on the Sylvven Tower, I remembered the Headmaster saying something like that. He said that his Magic Mirror was one of only two ever made, and that the other one had belonged to somebody he knew. But now I know who that person must have been! Slytherin has the other Magic Mirror! The twin of the one that brought me here!"

Ravenclaw's eyes had grown very sharp and wary. She glanced meaningfully aside at Hufflepuff.

"Let us search," Hufflepuff said quietly. "Then we shall know for sure."

Ravenclaw raised her wand and said the same incantation as before. The lavender light appeared at the end of her wand again. She turned slowly.

"In my last pass," she muttered, "I was merely searching for sign of Salazar, either as man or bat. Now…"

Hufflepuff paced around the room, watching the lavender light play on the walls.

"There," she announced, pointing.

Ravenclaw paused, resting the beam on a very large painting. It was a full-length portrait of a narrow-faced wizard in burgundy robes, and it was very nearly life-sized. The portrait slit its eyes at them and scowled. James saw that as the beam passed over the portrait, it illuminated the faint outline of a hidden doorway.

Ravenclaw pocketed her wand and stalked across the floor. She grasped the frame of the painting and pulled, but it was stuck tight to the wall. Hufflepuff joined her, but they could not move the painting even with all three of them pulling it.

"No more kid gloves," Ravenclaw said angrily. She stood back, motioning the others away. She pointed her wand at the portrait.

"Rowena Ravenclaw," the portrait sneered, "you know not what you are doing—"

"Convulsus!" Rowena cried, interrupting the portrait. There was a blinding burst of white light and the portrait seemed to vaporize. A moment later, once James' eyes had readjusted to the relative dimness of the room, he saw that the portrait had not, in fact, been completely obliterated. The frame had been destroyed, and the painting had been slashed straight down the middle leaving a gaping hole. The wooden back of the painting had been entirely blasted away, lost in the dark space beyond.

James, Hufflepuff, and Ravenclaw approached the slashed portrait carefully. James, between the two women, could see a sliver of light winking back at him from the depths beyond the torn canvas. In the dimness of the hidden chamber, James' own face looked back at him.

"It's there," James breathed, both elated and frightened. "I can see my reflection. It's the Magic Mirror!"

Hufflepuff illuminated her wand and held it out. Very carefully, she crept through the shredded painting into the dimness of the chamber behind it. Her wand lit the space and shone on the mirror's frame. As James entered the chamber and peered around Hufflepuff, he could see that this mirror was nearly identical to the one in Merlin's office, except that it stood upright rather than on its side. Also, there were words engraved on the golden frame of Slytherin's mirror. The inscription didn't make any sense to James, but the first word, carved in beautiful, flowing script, was 'Erised'.

"The Mirror," Hufflepuff said simply, her voice awed. "It wasn't destroyed after all. He had it this whole time."

Ravenclaw's face was flushed with anger. "We should have known. But what of its Focusing Book? Without it, the Mirror's power is uncontrollable and capricious, reduced only to its most basic and illusory functions. We must search for the book."

"Indeed, and search for it we shall, once we have told Godric of this discovery," Hufflepuff said. "For now, other matters demand our attention. James has done us a second great service. I suspect he'd prefer to take his leave if he can."

"I would, if you don't mind," James agreed. "It's been really cool to meet all of you. Well, most of you. But I'm really anxious to see if I can get back."

"James Potter," Hufflepuff said, smiling. "We'd have a myriad of questions for you, not the least of which would be what becomes of us, and what is this school like in your time. But I strongly suspect that the less we know of such things, the better."

"There is one question we should ask though, Helga," Ravenclaw said. She turned to James, her face grim and thoughtful. "If this tale you have told us is true, and I have no reason to doubt that it is, then the Headmaster of this college, some thousand years hence, has had collusion in this time with Salazar Slytherin. James, answer me this one question as truly as you can. Do you know the real name of this Headmaster of yours?"

"Sure," James said, frowning quizzically. "I thought I'd mentioned him already. It's Merlin. You'd probably know him as Merlinus Ambrosius. He came to our time last year, on the night of the alignment of the planets. I guess you'd call it the Hall of Elders' Crossing. I saw him just this evening. Well, heard him, actually, when I was trapped in the laboratory. He was right out there, in Slytherin's office."

Ravenclaw's face had gone very pale. She studied James, and then turned to look at Hufflepuff.

"He was here this very night," she said quietly. "It is all true. We scarce believed it."

"And this boy is proof that he succeeded. It is far worse than we expected. The legend—"

"Hush, Helga," Rowena said gravely. "James needn't hear of the details of that."

The two women looked at James. In the wandlight, their faces were very pale and deadly serious.

"Hear me now, James Potter: beware Merlinus," Ravenclaw said, speaking with great emphasis. "The sorcerer has a glamour that bewitches those who wish to trust him. If he has achieved the position of Headmaster, then he has already fooled many. It may even now be too late for your world. But you may have been sent here this night for a great purpose. Perhaps you go back to serve as a warning. That which Merlinus bodes upon your world is an evil like nothing the earth has ever known. The Gatekeeper of the Void may even now be unleashed, and Merlinus is its Ambassador. There is no battling the Gatekeeper, but if you can find a way to destroy the Ambassador, James Potter, you must take it. Do not let him put his glamour upon you. If the moment comes, it will not be the time for discourse or hesitation. It will be the time for action. Do you understand?"

James looked intently at Rowena Ravenclaw's earnest, pale face. Even here, a thousand years away from the events she was describing, she was clearly terrified. Slowly, James nodded.

"How dare you?!" a voice shrieked suddenly, furiously, making them all jump. "My chambers! My cache!"

Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw both spun in the confined space of the hidden chamber. They pointed their wands as a dark figure tore the decimated portrait away. The voice screamed, and it was chillingly inhuman. James suddenly remembered the slightly open doors of Slytherin's laboratory, remembered thinking he should warn Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw to check there. Slytherin had fooled them with a shadow, and then hidden there, probably in his bat form. And now, enraged that they had discovered his greatest secret, he seemed trapped halfway between his forms, half bat and half man. His voice buzzed hideously. Great, leathery wings flapped from his hunched back.

"Go James!" Hufflepuff cried, pointing her wand at Slytherin's grotesque shape. In his blind rage, he beat his enormous batwings, flailing them against the wall, preventing him from entering. He slavered monstrously, lunging and snapping his fanged mouth at the women.

"No!" James yelled. "I mean, I don't know how! I can't think!"

A bolt of red seared the air, striking Slytherin's wing. He screamed and the wing flailed limply.

"Get away from that Mirror!" he screamed, the words sounding alien in that strange, half-bat mouth. "Touch it and die!"

"Just go!" Ravenclaw urged desperately. "Just as you did before!"

Slytherin lunged again, finally forcing his way through the decimated portrait hole. Both Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw shot him with Stunning Spells, but in his mutated form, they only slightly weakened him. He snapped and roared at them.

James turned away and flung himself against the Mirror. The moment he touched it, the reflection sank away, revealing the familiar silvery smoke. It swirled dizzyingly before James' face.

"Go, James!" Hufflepuff cried. There was a whoosh and a horrid slashing sound. One of the witches screamed, but James couldn't tell which.

"I wish I was anywhere else!" James said aloud, then, panicked, he amended that. "I wish I was home! I wish I was in my own time! Right now!"

Directly behind him, Slytherin roared, his voice both human and beastly. James felt the air of Slytherin's beating wings and sensed the coming slash of the bat-like talons.

And then all of it was gone. The hidden chamber winked away, sucked into the swirling silvery mists. James felt the same odd sensation of flipping, as if he was being reversed through the Mirror. There was a rush of noise and speed, and then he was falling. He tumbled forward, catching himself on his hands and knees, and his wand clattered to the ground in front of him.

James looked up. He was in a small dim room. It seemed to be full of dusty trunks and stacked crates. He scrambled around, looking back in the direction from which he'd stumbled.

There, looking exactly the same but for a thick coating of dust, was Slytherin's Magic Mirror. The first word of the now-ancient inscription was still plainly visible: 'Erised'.

"James?" a girl's voice asked, startling him. "Is it you? It is! Wake up, you two! It happened!"

"Rose?" James asked, completely perplexed. She appeared from the shadows near the door, disheveled and covered with cobwebs. James blinked at her. "What are you doing here? Where am I?"

Ralph was climbing sleepily to his feet. "It's the middle of the bloody night. What else matters?"

"He knew!" Rose said, almost hopping with excitement. "He said you'd turn back up here if we made the Mirror ready, and you did! The three of us have been waiting here ever since dinner! We've been worried sick! James, what happened? Where have you been!?"

"Wait a minute," James said, climbing to his feet. "How'd Ralph know I would be showing up here? Nobody could possibly have known that."

"Not me," Ralph said sleepily, clapping James on the shoulder, "although I'd love to take credit for it. No, this was all his idea."

Ralph hooked a thumb over his shoulder. James looked and saw the boy getting slowly to his feet, a tired, crooked smile on his face.

"About time, Potter," Scorpius drawled. "Have a nice little trip?"

12. Questions of Trust

James insisted that, curious as everyone was, he was too exhausted for lengthy explanations. He told them merely that he'd travelled back to the time of the founders, and that he'd discovered far more than he intended about Merlin. He promised to explain everything in detail the next morning, which was Saturday. Reluctantly, the others agreed, and the four students crept out of the storage room. James allowed Ralph and Scorpius to lead the way through the dark corridors, returning to the main hall.

"You actually met the founders?" Rose demanded in a hoarse whisper, refusing to wait for details.

James nodded wearily. "I did. They were a lot more… real… than I ever imagined."

Rose shook her head wonderingly. "What was Helga Hufflepuff like? She's the one we hear the least about."

"She was tough," James said, "but nice. She wanted to talk things out with Slytherin even after he'd tried to kill the lot of us. But she wasn't a pushover. None of them were. They were hardcore. I'll tell you more tomorrow. How'd you all know I'd gone missing?"

"Well, it's been a whole day, hasn't it?" Ralph said in a whisper. "Besides, Cedric woke me up in the middle of the night last night. He told me exactly what happened. He thinks Merlin had bewitched the gargoyle to alert him, somehow, anytime somebody used the password to go up to the Headmaster's office. Merlin's been stalking all over the school, obviously mad as a hornet, but he hasn't said anything. Rose thinks he's been looking for something."

"I think he was looking for the Mirror of Erised!" Rose interjected. "I bet he sensed it was here, hidden away somewhere but couldn't find it. It's protected from discovery somehow. I bet it's got him in a total lather!"

"So how did you all find it?" James asked as they reached the stairs.

Ralph looked at Scorpius, who shrugged.

"I knew where to look," the pale boy said. "And when. More or less."

The four stopped at the base of the dark staircases. On the closest landing, the Heracles window had once again changed, Heracles' face reverting back to the caricature of Scorpius. Filch would be fuming.

James shook his head. "I just can't work it out, Scorpius. How could you possibly know?"

Scorpius drew a deep sigh. "I was told. My father knew all about it. He's been studying the writings of the founders for years. It's a sort of hobby of his. He wanted to learn about Salazar Slytherin, mainly, to see what he was really like, but then he got interested in the journals of Rowena Ravenclaw. She wrote down absolutely everything. Father worked out some of the clues and codes of Ravenclaw's diaries. Apparently, she *intended* for them to be discovered. She describes a boy who visited her and the other founders, a boy supposedly from the distant future. She discovered that if he was to succeed in returning through the right Mirror, someone would have to prepare it on this side, in *this* time. She'd determined it was her duty to make sure that happened, so she developed the codex and left clues for the right person to figure it all out. My father was apparently that person. The clues gave a timeframe and instructions."

James' head was spinning. "But how could she work that out? How could she know an exact timeframe?"

Scorpius shrugged. "That's a question for my father. I can't imagine why it'd matter. The fact is that she did work it out."

"It's obvious," Rose whispered. "You must have told her the time you came from. You must have given clues."

"I didn't tell them anything like that!" James said, but then a thought occurred to him. "I did tell them about Merlin's reappearance though. I told them it happened a year ago, on the night of the alignment of the planets."

"That's almost all she'd need," Rose replied. "They knew how to track those kinds of events. She probably factored out the exact date of the alignment, then added in loads of other clues you'd mentioned, like the day of the week or the month, the time during the school term, even the phase of the moon. She was dead smart, you know!"

James nodded. "No doubt about that. But still, how did you find the Mirror if Merlin can't even find it?"

Rose interrupted Scorpius, "Ravenclaw gave a sort of magical map! She embedded an enchanted signal in the Mirror of Erised, and listed the spell required to locate the signal. All we had to do then was follow it. When we found it, we were simply to touch the Mirror and wish for lost items to be returned to us. That's what we did, and then we just waited. Finally, bang! Here you are again!"

"Pretty neat, eh?" Ralph whispered, grinning. "And all because of Scorpius here. Or his dad, actually."

Scorpius rolled his eyes. "If we're done congratulating ourselves, I've got plans in the morning. You three can stay here and get cornered by Filch's ancient Kneazle-cat if you wish, but I'm off to bed." He turned and began to creep up the stairs.

James said goodnight to Ralph, then followed Scorpius up the stairs, Rose at his side.

As the three passed through the portrait hole into the Gryffindor common room, Rose smiled tiredly at James.

"I'm glad you made it back, James. We didn't know where you'd really gone, or if Scorpius' information was correct. I was really scared. I thought maybe Merlin had gotten you somehow."

James furrowed his brow, thinking of the words Rowena Ravenclaw had said to him, urging James not to be taken in by Merlin, warning him he might have to confront the sorcerer if the moment was right. He tried to smile gamely at Rose.

"I'm fine," he said. "But it was close. I'll tell you all about it tomorrow. I'll tell you everything, if you really want to know. For now, let's sleep. I'm nearly dead on my feet."

They said goodnight and climbed their respective staircases. When James got to the darkened dormitory, Scorpius was already in his bed, his back to James.

James' pilfered cleric robe had not come through the Mirror with him, so he was still dressed in his stripy pyjamas. Wearily, he put his glasses and his wand back in his bag and climbed into bed. He lay there a moment, and then sat up.

"Scorpius," he whispered. The boy didn't move, but James knew he was listening. "I don't know why you helped me, but thanks."

James lay back down. A minute went by and James was nearly asleep when he heard Scorpius move. Out of the darkness, the boy replied in a whisper, "Don't thank me yet, Potter. The time may come when you'll wish you'd never made it back. The time may come when you'll curse me for helping you."

James slept very late the next morning and awoke to a bright glare of snow and frost on the dormitory window. He washed, dressed, and clumped downstairs, looking for his friends. Eventually, he found Rose and Ralph in the library, arguing quietly over one of Professor Revalvier's homework questions.

"You two are pathetic," James said. "Doing homework on a Saturday morning."

"Technically, it's hardly morning anymore," Rose replied. "We've been waiting for you. We're dying to know what happened yesterday."

Ralph closed his book with a thump. "Besides, it's dead cold outside. Even the lake's freezing over. All the older years are mooning around trying to figure out who to go to the Yule Ball with. There's nothing else to do. By the way, did you get Zane's duck?"

James blinked. "When? The other night?"

"No, early this morning. Er, last night, by his time. He wants to hear about what happened to you, too. He said we should duck him back when you're ready to talk about it and tell him where to meet us."

James shook his head and smiled. "That's crazy!"

"That's Zane," Ralph shrugged.

"What about Scorpius?" James asked reluctantly. "Should we include him?"

Rose looked uncomfortable. "He says he knows everything he needs to know about it already."

"Whatever that means," Ralph added. "Oh yeah, that reminds me. You got something called a 'Howler' yesterday morning."

"What?" James said, frowning. "A Howler? From who?"

"Your mum," Rose answered. "It was delivered during breakfast, but you weren't there to open it. We tried to get it out of the Great Hall, but it went off before we could. I'm afraid everybody heard it. You really could've told us, James."

"What are you talking about?" James exclaimed. "What did the Howler say?"

Rose studied James' face. "You really don't know?"

"Bloody hell, Rose, you're killing me here! What did it say?"

"It was your mum's voice," Ralph said. "She was really mad, and loud as a trumpet. She said she couldn't really blame you for taking them last year because you were just being your father's son, but she'd hoped you'd learned your lesson. She said that they were dangerous, and what's more, that they belong to your father, and he was also pretty disappointed in you for nicking them again. Then she said that she hoped everyone was hearing it, including the teachers, so they'd all know that you were sneaking around with the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map, and that they should put a stop to it."

James spluttered, speechless. "But—but I didn't take them! They're still at home in Dad's trunk! I haven't touched them since last year!"

"Well," Rose said, pointing out the obvious, "they aren't at home in your dad's trunk even if you didn't take them. They've gone missing and your mum seemed pretty certain that you were the one who'd done it."

James felt both angry and hurt. How could she just accuse him like that? Sure, he'd borrowed the Cloak and the map last year, but he'd had very good reasons for it. He'd accepted his punishment, hadn't he? He didn't have any plans of borrowing the Cloak and map at all this year. But who could have taken them, then? And then, with a start, James remembered the morning they'd left for the train when Albus had been mysteriously late about packing his trunk.

"That little Skrewt!" James breathed, furious.

"What?" Rose asked. "Who?"

"Albus! The little Slytherin imp! He stole them! It had to have been him! The morning we left for the train, he was moping around, half-packed. Then, all of a sudden he left the room for a few minutes. Mum and Dad were downstairs getting the car around. He must have sneaked into their room and stolen the Cloak and the map out of Dad's trunk. He knew they'd blame me!"

"You can't know that," Rose admonished.

"I can't," James agreed, nodding. "But I do. Just wait until I get my hands on him. I'll make him send an owl to Mum and Dad confessing the whole thing. See if I don't."

"In the meantime," Ralph interjected, "we're still dying to hear about your wild adventure yesterday. Can we put this little detail behind us for the moment?"

James was still seething, but he agreed. He'd just have to see if he could track Albus down later that afternoon. Maybe he'd take Ralph up on his offer to escort him down to the Slytherin common room.

Ralph went on, "We've been thinking about it and we've come up with a great place to meet Zane and hear your story. Go grab your cloak and meet us by the rotunda entrance. And bring your wand."

A few minutes later, James once again met Ralph and Rose by the broken remains of the founders' statues. The huge rotunda gates had been closed against the wintry day, but a small door set into the left gate remained unlocked. Rose led them to it.

As James crossed the marble floor, he felt very strange. He remembered the statues as he'd last seen them, intact and new. He looked up as he passed through the main arch. The engraved name of the school was worn, almost lost in the dim recesses of the vaulted ceiling. James imagined that if he went over to the statue plinth, he might still find bits of the broken silver-framed mirror in the cracks of the floor. He shivered.

As they went through the tiny doorway, the three students squinted in the blinding, snowy brightness of the day. The lake was indeed half-frozen, with white edge-ice fading to black near the center where

waves lapped onto the brittle surface. The wind was bitter and harsh, carrying flecks of snow like sand. None of the three spoke as they worked their way around the castle, huddled against the cold, and James was amused to see that they were walking toward the ancient stone barn in which Hagrid housed his menagerie.

"It'll be warm in here," Ralph called, yanking the main door open. "And we can be pretty sure nobody else will come out here today. Too bitter!"

It was indeed quite warm in the barn, thanks to Norberta's occasional flamings. Wall-mounted lanterns lit the dirt floor gaily, contrasting against the cold, white light which streamed through the barn's small windows. The beasts in their cages snuffled and barked as the students passed.

"There're benches over by the larger pens," Rose pointed out. "Let's have a seat. I've packed a flask of hot chocolate and some Cockroach Clusters."

"Blimey, Rose," Ralph said appreciatively. "You think of everything!"

Rose unpacked her bag, setting out the flask and some cups. "Too bad for Zane," she commented. "He can't have any, not really being here."

"I brought my own," Zane said happily, appearing in midair between them. The three students jumped back, and then looked up at the suspended shape. Zane floated two feet off the ground, apparently seated on nothing and happily munching a chunk of sausage on a fork. "It's barely breakfast here, you know, and I'm not normally a morning person. But I wouldn't miss this for anything. Good to see you made it back, James."

"Er, thanks," James replied. "But this is a little weird. You're, er, off a bit."

Zane glanced around, munching the sausage. "Ah, yeah. Hey, Raphael, what do we do when the Doppelganger insists on levitating?"

There was a pause as Zane listened. He nodded. "Sorry, guys. It's apparently part of the Doppelganger's basic intuition. It wants to make the apparition float. It's supposed to be creepier that way. Maybe it'll calm down in a little while if it gets bored."

"You've harnessed a Doppelganger of yourself and are using it to project messages?" Rose said incredulously.

"You didn't explain it to her?" Zane asked, looking at James. "She's pretty quick though, isn't she?"

"But that's patently and completely impossible!" Rose spluttered. "Doppelgangers are just myths! This is worse than the bit about the Chaos Butterfly!"

"It's a little late to be claiming it won't work, Rosie," Ralph said, munching a Cockroach Cluster.

"We can maintain this as long as we need to," Zane said, putting his fork down. It seemed to float alongside him, unsupported. "Just so long as you occasionally shoot me with a Stinging Hex or something, just to boost the magic a little. Truth is: Franklyn's glad for the testing time. So go to it, James. Tell us all about your adventures in the Stone Age."

James plunged into his tale, trying to remember everything. He explained his trip through the Mirror, and where he'd ended up, becoming, against all probability, the mysterious 'ghost in the plinth' as Ashley Doone had joked. This required a little further explanation as Zane had never seen the photo of the founders nor heard of the conspiracies about the shadowy face hidden in the background. James then went on to explain his capture at the hands of Salazar Slytherin, and the subsequent overheard conversation between Slytherin and the Merlin of that time. He described the duel on top of the Sylvven Tower, and the adventure of finding Slytherin's twin of Merlin's Amsera Certh. Finally, he relayed the words of Rowena Ravenclaw, warning what Merlin's return meant and how he was the Ambassador of the Gatekeeper. To cement her words, James produced the tabloid clipping Lucy had sent, obviously alluding to the work of the horrible entity.

By the time James had finished, the hot chocolate and Cockroach Clusters were long gone, and the three had had to shoot Stinging Hexes at Zane nearly a dozen times.

"Sounds like there was something going on with that Mirror back in the founders' day," Zane commented, "based on the way Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw responded when you found it."

"It does," Rose agreed. "It sounds like they'd known about it but believed it had been destroyed somehow. Obviously, Slytherin staged that so he could hoard the Mirror for himself. In the end though, the other founders got it back, but without the Focusing Book, apparently, which Slytherin had probably hidden elsewhere. James, you affected history!"

"He couldn't have," Ralph said, frowning. "Obviously they'd captured the Mirror of Erised back from Slytherin even before James went back in time. It figures pretty importantly in your dad's story, doesn't it, James?"

James nodded. "Yeah, I've heard him talk about it lots of times. He saw his dead parents in that Mirror. It really meant a lot to him. Almost too much, according to Dumbledore."

"This is why Time-Turners have been outlawed," Rose sniffed. "Time travel is just too complicated and weird. If James travelled back in time, then I guess it stands to reason that he'd existed in the past all along. He *was* the reason the Mirror was captured back from Slytherin on the night he was found out. That's why his face appeared in the shadows of the founders' photograph even before he went back."

Ralph screwed his face up in concentration. "That doesn't make any sense at all."

"No, using Doppelgangers to relay personal messages doesn't make any sense," Rose replied, glancing aside at the floating figure of Zane. "This is just improbable and complicated."

"But we did learn what we needed to know about Merlin," James said sadly. "We can't trust him. He's the Ambassador of this Gatekeeper creature. We might even have to fight him if we hope to send it back."

"Not me," Ralph said vigorously. "I've got part of his staff as my wand. It'd probably turn on me!"

Rose shook her head. "It doesn't work that way, Ralph. It's yours now. It obeys the wizard that wins it."

"It may not come to fighting Merlin," Zane said, his expression thoughtful. "It sounded like Merlin wasn't really excited about the descent of the Gatekeeper, but he knew it was possible. He took the Beacon stone from Slytherin so he could control it if it followed him back. Maybe he means to send it back. After all, like I said before, the fact that you three are still breathing means he can't be all evil. He knows you know. Especially now."

"He only has half of the Beacon stone," Rose replied. "Slytherin had the other half. He meant to pass it on, so that whoever was still alive when the Curse descended would be able to control it. The fact is that neither Merlin nor this other person can control the Gatekeeper completely. Somebody would have to put both rings together to banish the Gatekeeper back to the Void."

"Or to unleash it fully on the world," Ralph shuddered. "This thing's out there even now? That's what we saw that day in the Magic Mirror talking to Voldemort's grave statue, isn't it? It's already happening!"

"So maybe Merlin's trying to find the other half of the stone," Zane mused. "I just can't buy that he's gone over to the dark side."

"He wouldn't need to 'go over'," James said suddenly. "Ravenclaw said he was dead dangerous! Rose was right; Merlin was just a magical mercenary. He only stopped killing and cursing for hire when he fell in love with the Lady of the Lake. Then *that* turned out completely horrible and Merlin went mad with revenge. He ended up killing her without even knowing it! After that, he hated the whole world, magic and Muggle alike, so he took Slytherin's Beacon Stone and allowed the descent of the one creature who could end it all! We're fooling ourselves if we don't believe that."

Zane shook his head gravely. "I hope you're wrong, James, but if you aren't, you three better be very careful."

"The whole world better be careful," James answered morosely. "Not that it'll matter much. There's only one thing we can do to help now."

"What's that?" Rose asked. "Watch Merlin," James answered meaningfully. "And try to find the two halves of the Beacon Stone."

With the Christmas holiday fast approaching, James found time slipping by in a blur. He had been determined to ask Ralph to take him down to the Slytherin common room so James could confront Albus about the missing Invisibility Cloak and Marauder's Map, but each evening seemed to magically fill up with homework and studying, preparations for the week's Defence Club meeting, play rehearsals, and costume fittings.

By the evening of the last Quidditch match of the year, James had still not spoken to Albus. He determined he would do it that night after the match. As an early winter dusk descended over the grounds, dark, ominous clouds were pushing in from the east. By the time James and Rose were sidling into their seats in the Gryffindor grandstand, fat snowflakes had begun to fall. The snow made a thick, white curtain, transforming the pitch into a ghostly shadow play. Across the pitch, the Slytherin grandstand was nothing but a tall grey monolith.

The players streaked from their holding pens, foregoing the traditional displays of aerial acrobatics for fear that they might crash into one another in the fog of snow even before the match began. Far below, barely visible, Gryffindor Captain Devindar Das shook hands with Tabitha Corsica, Slytherin's Captain. Shortly thereafter, the two captains kicked off, joining their teams in the air. Cabe Ridcully, the match official, released the Bludgers and Snitch and tossed the Quaffle into the waiting team formations. The teams sprang into action and the match was underway.

James found it a very difficult match to watch, and not just because of the thick, blinding snowfall. He was still smarting from his failure to make the team for the second year in a row, and especially because he'd simply been too distracted to remember when try-outs were. He cursed himself repeatedly, thinking it should be him out there facing off against Albus as Seeker. It was nothing short of completely humiliating that Albus was showing him up on the broom. Fortunately, being a Gryffindor, James could legitimately cheer for Albus' opponents without it seeming like sour grapes. When Noah swatted a well-placed Bludger at Albus, striking him in the back and nearly throwing him off his broom, James leapt to his feet, hooting derisively. A moment later, he felt slightly guilty. Then he remembered that, most likely, Al had nicked the Invisibility Cloak and Marauder's Map and left James to take the blame for it. He hooted some more, shouting for Noah to aim for the head next time.

In the end, despite a very closely played match, Gryffindor had won. Tara Umar, Gryffindor's Seeker, did a victory lap around the grandstands, Snitch held high, while the air rang with cheers and raucous commotion.

James clumped down the stairs two at a time, meaning to catch Albus while he was still on the field. He ran out onto the snow-dusted grass, looking left and right for his brother. Finally, he saw him with his broom slung over his shoulder and his head down, apparently in deep conversation with Tabitha

Corsica and Philia Goyle. Feeling a mixture of triumphant spite and righteous anger, James charged directly toward them.

"We have to talk, Albus," he yelled over the noise of the departing crowd. "Mum sent me a Howler that should've been addressed to you, you know."

Albus didn't respond, but Tabitha and Philia looked up. Philia scowled at James, but Tabitha's eyes were strangely bright and expressionless. She saw James approaching but didn't say anything.

James stopped a few feet away, his face going red. He had the distinct impression that he was interrupting something, and felt infuriatingly awkward. He was supposed to have the upper hand in this situation, wasn't he? He cleared his throat loudly.

"I hear you," Albus declared without turning around. Tabitha glanced away, out into the strangely silent snowfall. After a moment, she took Albus' broom and walked slowly toward the Slytherin holding pen. Philia followed, throwing a black look back in James' direction.

"Your timing is pretty rotten, James," Albus said, turning around but not raising his eyes.

"Well, I'm terribly sorry. Shall I make an appointment with your scheduler? I assume 'Tabby' would be in charge of that, yes?"

"This isn't about me, you prat," Albus said, finally looking at James. "Tabitha is going through a very hard time. The loss tonight is sort of the last straw. It meant a lot to her. But I'm sure you couldn't care less about that. You only care when Gryffindors have problems."

James narrowed his eyes and spread his hands. "What are you talking about, Al? I've hardly seen a speck of you ever since you disappeared into that Slytherin dungeon! So who exactly doesn't care what's going on outside his own house, eh? And not that you'd care, but I have very good reasons for hating that two-faced viper! Where were you last year when she was calling our Dad a liar and a fraud?"

Albus shook his head, not meeting James' eyes. "That was then. The point is, James, you're a Gryffindor. You just don't understand the way she grew up and the things she's had to deal with. Of course I don't agree with everything they say down there, but you have to understand the way they've been taught. They have reasons for being angry. Especially Tabitha."

James could barely listen. He stomped his foot on the field and nearly cursed. "It doesn't matter! Albus, they're just using you. How can you not see it? They don't have hearts! They don't care about you. Especially that silver-tongued minx. You'll regret ever being taken in by them! And don't say I didn't warn you."

Albus lowered his brow and looked hard at James. "I promise I'll never say you didn't warn me, James. But I'll tell you right now that Tabitha has never talked to me the way you're talking to me right now. Nor has she ever talked about you the way you're talking about her. She's my friend. And to be

honest, she needs friends right now—a lot more than I need a brother."

James wanted to spit with rage. How could Albus be so completely obtuse? Albus stared at him as if he was simply waiting for James to go away.

"You took the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map," James finally said, resorting to the one thing he knew he could feel indignant about.

Albus' face changed. He looked truly puzzled and a little wary. "What are you talking about, James?"

"Don't play all innocent with me, Al. You heard the Howler Mum sent me. Rose said everyone in the Great Hall heard it the other day at breakfast. She thinks I stole them, just because I borrowed them last year. You have to tell Mum the truth."

"What truth, James?" Albus said, angry and exasperated. "You do have them! You must! I didn't take them!"

"Of course you did! Don't lie to me! I can always tell!"

"Well, then maybe you don't know me like you think you do! Don't pin this on me, James. I'm not letting you make me into the bad guy just because you hate that I'm a Slytherin."

James spluttered. "What? That has nothing to do with it! I just don't want Mum to think—"

"It has everything to do with it!" Albus yelled, and his voice sounded oddly flat in the thick curtain of snow. The pitch was nearly empty now except for the two boys. "You were so worried about getting into Gryffindor so you could be like dear old Dad and Mum. You tried so hard that you wouldn't let yourself be you! Well, I'm being me, and only me. Albus Severus Potter, Slytherin. You can be jealous all you want, but don't try to ruin it for me! I've been warned that you'll try. But believe me, you'll be sorry if you do."

Albus turned and stalked away, disappearing quickly into the dense snow.

"Al, wait!" James called, starting to follow his brother. He stopped after a few steps. "Look, Al, that came out totally wrong. I don't know what to say to all that, but blimey, there's no reason we need to go to war, is there? We can't let something stupid like our houses come between us."

James could see that Albus had stopped. He was barely a grey shape in the silent snowfall. "You're the one making it a problem, James."

"Look," James said awkwardly, "forget it, all right? But honestly… you really didn't take the map and Cloak?"

Albus' grey shape stood silently, looking back at James. He seemed to shake his head, but James couldn't be sure. Then Albus said, "Are you going to go home for the holiday?"

James blinked. "Why wouldn't I?"

"Mum obviously thinks we talk more than we do," Albus said, as if in explanation. "She sent me a letter the day you got the Howler. The Burrow's been sold. The family is moving everything out over the holiday. It's the only time everybody is available to help. Makes for a pretty awful holiday, though. I told Mum I'm staying here. I don't want to see Granddad's world taken apart bit by bit."

James felt as if he'd been punched in the stomach. "They sold the Burrow?"

The hazy silhouette of Albus seemed to nod this time. "Some old couple by the name of Templeton bought it. Not Muggles at least. They're going to tear it down and build a little summer cottage on the property. Mum says at least they're keeping the orchard."

There was a long silence between the two brothers. Finally, James said, "I didn't know. Mum didn't say anything to me."

"Like I said, she thought I'd tell you. And I just did. I'm not going home for that. Happy bloody Christmas, eh?"

James couldn't help chuckling a little hollowly. "Go talk to Tabitha, Al. We'll figure everything out later."

Without a word, Albus turned and vanished completely into the snow. James looked around. The grandstands were almost completely invisible. He seemed to stand in an island of snow-covered grass, surrounded by silently falling flakes. In the darkness, the curtain of snow looked more like ash. James brushed off his shoulders, sighed, and trudged off the pitch.

Rose was equally upset about the sale of the Burrow, but she seemed to reluctantly understand the necessity of it. Together, she and James determined they would also stay at Hogwarts over the holiday. She even managed to make it seem like it might be a fun adventure. She immediately wrote a short letter to her parents asking if it would be all right for her to stay over. James added a note to Rose's letter, asking Aunt Hermione to pass the word on to his mum and dad that he'd decided to stay over as well, as had Albus.

"They'll let us, of course," Rose nodded as she sealed the letter. "They know it'd be awful to see the place broken up over the holiday, especially since we've all spent so many happy Christmases there. Honestly, it'll probably be easier for them to manage if we aren't around anyway."

As a distraction, James returned his attention to the threat of the Gatekeeper and the mystery of Merlin's involvement. He reminded Ralph and Rose that they were to be looking for the two Beacon Stones. He knew they might be very difficult to trace, but as it turned out, the first half of the Beacon Stone was very easy to locate.

James, Ralph, and Rose were taking notes in the last Wizlit class before Christmas holiday when Merlin knocked peremptorily on the door, interrupting Professor Revalvier.

"Ah, Headmaster," Revalvier said, smiling. "We were just speaking of you, in a sense. You do tend to crop up from time to time in the books of the kings, although in a much exaggerated manner, I am sure."

Merlin approached the professor's desk. "Indeed. It is that very detail that I've come to discuss, briefly, if I may."

The Headmaster lowered his voice so that only Revalvier could hear him. The class sensed an unattended moment, and immediately fell to hushed conversations and shuffling of papers, preparing to dismiss for lunch.

Rose nudged James hard with her elbow. James looked over at her, irritated, and then saw her wide eyes and furtive glance. He followed her gesture. Merlin was standing very close to Professor Revalvier, whose smile had vanished. The Headmaster's hand hung at his side, very large and powerful-looking. He didn't have his staff with him, but that didn't mean anything. Merlin seemed able to produce it as necessary, as if he kept it in an invisible closet that followed him wherever he went.

"What?" James whispered, not seeing what Rose was hinting at. Then, with a start, he saw the black ring on Merlin's hand. It sparkled dully, as if it reflected light only reluctantly. He shouldn't have been surprised. He'd been there on the night a thousand years ago when Salazar Slytherin had presented the ring to Merlin. And yet seeing it now, glinting evilly on the sorcerer's finger, made it all too real. Up until now, he'd been able to half-convince himself that it had all been a sort of dream.

Revalvier nodded curtly, obviously unhappy with what Merlin had said to her. Merlin turned and left the room without sparing a glance at the class.

"It seems that there is to be a slight change in this holiday's reading assignment," Revalvier said, closing the book on her desk. "The Headmaster feels it would be more beneficial for us to skip the last century of the Dark Ages and proceed directly to the Renaissance. He may have a point. The Renaissance is, as its name implies, the golden age of wizarding literature. Thus, you may disregard the rest of the current chapter in your textbooks and omit Hrung Hrynddvane from your holiday reading assignment. Perhaps you'll choose to spend that time getting an early start on Waddeljav's Book of Nameless Tales. If so, do keep a written record of the actual story names since they will surely change by the time we reconvene."

As the class clambered toward the door, Rose pushed in between James and Ralph. "Did you see it?" she whispered.

"Yeah," Ralph replied. "I guess there's no doubt about Merlin and this Gatekeeper thing anymore, is there? Why do you suppose he doesn't want us reading Hrynddvane's chronicles?"

"It's obvious," James said in a low voice. "He knows there are things in there about him. He's trying to manage everybody's perceptions about the kind of wizard he is. Revalvier can tell us all she wants about how those histories are exaggerated into legends, but if people keep reading about how Merlin buried this army and flooded that camp and whatever else, there are bound to be people who start to question him. Like Ravenclaw said, he has a way of entrancing people who want to trust him. He needs to make sure everyone keeps wanting to think he's all noble and good."

As the three crossed the library, Ralph angled into a narrow aisle, turning to face James and Rose. "So if Merlin has the stone, does that mean we're all done for?"

"Not exactly," Rose said. "Remember, there were two rings, each with half of the Beacon Stone. Whoever has the other ring also has some influence over the Gatekeeper. As long as Merlin doesn't have both halves, he can't fully control it."

"So our only hope is that the other half of the stone is in the right hands," James replied. "As long as one keeper of the stone is trying to hold the Gatekeeper back, its power will be limited."

Rose looked worried. "For a while, yes. I hadn't had a chance to tell you what I've learned since we last talked about it. According to all the legends, once the Gatekeeper finds a human host—a host who has willingly killed to prove their worthiness—the stones won't influence it at all anymore. The Beacon Stone is the Gatekeeper's foothold in this world, but only until it becomes one with its human host. When that happens, it won't need the stones. Nothing will be able to send it back to the Void."

"When did you read this?" Ralph asked, his face going pale.

"Last night. I've been studying everything I can find about the Curse of the Gatekeeper. I compared notes with Cousin Lucy by owl, and she's right. A lot of it is pretty horrible and fantastic, but all the writings agree on the main details: The Beacon Stone summons the Gatekeeper when the bearer suspends in the Void for a long enough time; the Gatekeeper follows the bearer of the stone into our world, and the bearer becomes its Ambassador; the Ambassador can use the Beacon Stone to send the Gatekeeper back to the Void, but only as long as the Gatekeeper hasn't entered its human host. Once that happens, the Beacon Stone is useless and the Curse of the Gatekeeper is unleashed on the earth. When that happens, nothing can stop it."

James frowned, trying to examine the legend from every angle. "So since the stone's been split in two, neither of the bearers can send it back even if they wanted to."

"But what does the Gatekeeper want?" Ralph asked Rose. "Why does it want to destroy everything?"

Rose's face had also gone pale. "It's really very simple. It hates us because we aren't it. It has always believed it was the only living thing. Now that it has discovered the world of humans, it refuses to share existence with us. Also, even more awful, it feeds on despair and agony like the world's

hungriest and most powerful Dementor. But where Dementors only call up your own memories of the worst things that have ever happened to you, the Gatekeeper creates all new feelings. It can manipulate a person's mind at the most basic level, creating raw, sourceless panic and terror. That's what we read about in the tabloid article Lucy sent us. It was trying to figure those humans out, trying to work out the best way to produce what it hungers for. For now, it can only affect a few humans at once. But once it connects with its human host and becomes a part of the community of mankind, it'll be able to affect thousands and millions at once. It'll just suck the terror out of everyone until there's nothing left of them, then leave them like husks and move on. It'll move over the earth doing that until there's no one left at all."

"No one but the host," Ralph squeaked.

"Not even the host," Rose whispered. "In the end, it'll turn on them too. It wishes to be entirely alone. In the end, it'll break its own tool. The scariest thing is that the host may even know it. The host may be so full of pain and sadness and hate that they won't care. They may even wish for it."

Something had pricked James' memory. Rose saw it on his face. "What, James? You look like you just swallowed a hippogriff egg."

"My dream," James replied, touching his forehead. "What you're saying sounds a lot like the words of the voice in my dream. There's this black robed figure standing in the corner, talking all the time, telling the person in my dream that justice will be served, and the day of balance is coming, and it always says that the person in my dream is to be the hand that brings it about if they are willing, if they are up to the task that will prove their worth. And the person in my dream does seem to be willing. They seem to be very sad and very angry, all at the same time. It's as if they've felt a loss so great that it makes the whole world meaningless. Worse, that the whole world shouldn't even exist anymore, because it's the world their tragedy happened in. It's a very vengeful, hateful, hopeless feeling, but mostly, it's just sad, so sad that it's like a black wall that goes on forever with no gate or corners or top to climb over."

"Maybe the person in your dream is meant to be the host of the Gatekeeper," Ralph said, his eyes wide. "It almost sounds like Merlin, doesn't it? I mean, he ended up killing the woman he loved most in all the world. You said he left his own time because he couldn't bear to live in it anymore, knowing what he'd done, right? Maybe coming to this time isn't any better for him! Maybe he'd be happy to let the Gatekeeper destroy everything and everyone, even himself!"

Rose nodded slowly. "It does certainly sound like what he might be feeling. The Gatekeeper's host doesn't have to be its Ambassador, but there's nothing that says it couldn't."

James was thinking hard, trying to remember his dreams. He shook his head. "It's not Merlin, though, in my dream. I've never seen the person's face, but I'm sure it isn't him. It just feels all wrong. It's someone younger. And different. Definitely not Merlin."

Rose gasped and covered her mouth with both hands, her eyes going wide. Ralph jumped at her

sudden movement. "What?" he exclaimed.

"The Bloodline!" Rose said in a very high voice. "They even mentioned it in that scene in the Mirror, at Tom Riddle's grave, don't you remember? The Gatekeeper went looking for the best host it could find, and sensed Voldemort's body. It knows almost nothing about humans, so it didn't realize Voldemort was dead until it got there. Then it made the statue talk, somehow tapping into the ghost of Voldemort. The statue told the Gatekeeper that there was another host for it, one with Voldemort's blood in its veins. Remember? It's obvious! The Gatekeeper's host is to be the Bloodline of Voldemort!"

"But who is it?" Ralph asked. "We don't know that, so we're right back where we started."

"We don't know it yet," Rose said, smiling a little nervously. "But we have a way of finding out." She looked at James.

James pressed his lips together and sighed. "My phantom scar. But we don't even know where it's coming from or if we can trust it."

Rose shrugged. "It's all we have. All we can do is hope it's not a trick of some kind. Pay attention to your dreams, James. They're probably our only clue. Maybe you'll finally get a good look at whoever it is and we'll learn who the Bloodline is."

"And who the mysterious speaking voice is too," Ralph added meaningfully.

"Yes, that too," Rose agreed. "Good point, Ralph. Maybe it's Merlin himself, don't you think?"

Ralph heaved a great sigh. "I don't know. I hope not. But the alternative could be worse, couldn't it? I mean, a known enemy is better than an unknown one, right?"

After lunch, James hurried across the castle to the amphitheater where Muggle Studies would be meeting for the rest of the term. When he got to the archway leading outside to the terraced seating, he was quite surprised to feel warm air despite the snowflakes which fell like a curtain over the distant hills.

Damien Damascus met James near the base of the stage. "Fortunately," he said, smiling, "Curry isn't such a slave to doing things like the Muggles that she isn't willing to magic a little atmosphere for us to work in. Nice, eh? Now I just have to get the hang of this thing." He held up a hammer and studied it at arm's length. "It's a bit brutish, don't you think?"

The atmosphere around the stage was indeed strangely pleasant. James took off his cloak and flung it over a seat in the front row. He looked up, smiling in wonderment. The sky was thick with grey clouds and drifting, skirling snowflakes, but the snow seemed to vanish as it fell into the air over the amphitheater. The light near the stage even seemed brighter, as if an errant sunbeam had simply bypassed the cloud cover and jumped directly into the bowl of the amphitheater. James remembered his Technomancy classes from last year, and knew that somewhere, strangely, a small, dark pocket of

snow was falling on a warm, sunny hillside.

"Ah, James," Curry cried, walking briskly across the stage. "My little Treus, you're here after all. I trust you have your script. Do join us. We're simply blocking out scenes for now, but it helps to have you read through the lines for timing purposes."

As James read aloud through his lines and walked through act one with the rest of the actors, he found he was truly enjoying himself despite his earlier worries about Merlin and the Gatekeeper. It felt a little strange acting out the parts amidst the clatter and shouts of Jason Smith's hardworking stage crew. As James read through a scripted conversation with Noah Metzker as Donovan, Damien and three other crew members were raising a gigantic wooden mock-up of a castle wall, complete with a rampart, a turret, and a balcony. Their shouts and grunts of effort nearly drowned out James and Noah's words.

As they moved over the stage, Curry followed them with a roll of thick yellow tape. Occasionally, she'd move James by the shoulders, positioning him on the stage.

"Hit this mark when you read that line," she'd instruct him, bending down to tape an 'X' on the stage floor. "We'll arrange a spotlight for this position. Mr. Metzker, do go ahead, and make sure you don't turn your back on the audience."

"But James is over there," Noah said, gesturing. "I'm supposed to be talking to him, aren't I?"

"You are an actor, Mr. Metzker," Curry trilled. "You are speaking to the audience first and foremost."

Noah frowned and looked out over the mostly empty seats. "But they aren't the ones threatening to run off with Astra, are they?"

Curry sighed. "Just read the lines, Mr. Metzker. We'll work out who's running off with whom later."

As they prepared to read through act two, James realized he'd been feeling a dull throb in his forehead. He reminded himself not to rub it, but it was definitely getting worse. He glanced out over the amphitheater seating, squinting through the glare of the spotlights. There, sitting near the back, almost lost in the shadows, was Merlin. James couldn't make out his face, but he could easily see the large man's shape. Merlin seemed to realize James was looking at him. He raised a hand and tapped his forehead slowly, as if he were making a sign. James' eyes widened, and then, suddenly, his forehead burned. It was as if a hot poker had been pressed to it. James squeezed his eyes shut, turning away.

He bumped into someone, nearly knocking them over.

"James? What is it?" Curry called out. "You nearly knocked your leading lady off the stage."

James looked up, the pain in his forehead receding again. Petra was looking at him with a concerned expression. "Are you all right, James?"

"It's just the lights," James lied. "They're pretty hot. I'm fine now." He tried to grin and shrug.

Curry turned and began calling for the rest of the performers for the second act. Petra moved close to James and lowered her voice. "I know what you mean about the lights," she said, smiling. "These Muggle electric spotlights are like death rays, aren't they? Too bad we didn't have one to use with the Wocket last year."

James grinned and flushed. "Yeah," he said, and then didn't know what else to say. "Er, do you know all your lines yet?"

"Not at all," Petra admitted. "Frankly, I feel a little bad about getting the role. Poor Josephina's been forced to work in the costume shop. She can't sew at all either. They just have her ripping seams when the others make mistakes. I hear the Vertigo Hex is still so strong that she can't even climb stairs. She's moved into the hospital wing until they can figure out a way to get her up to her dorm."

Petra's voice sounded concerned, but James saw that she was smiling a little. James realized it was a little funny. Josephina had been rather insufferable about getting the part of Astra, and James felt very strongly that Petra would play the part better anyway. He decided to say so to Petra.

"It is a shame about Josephina, I suppose," he said, "but I'm really glad you got the part. I'd much rather play Treus for you than for her."

"Places, everyone!" Curry called. "Mr. Potter, Miss Morganstern, this way please."

Petra glanced away at the sound of Curry's voice. "Come, James," she said, striding away, "our public awaits."

James felt himself blush. He watched Petra walk across the stage and then ran to catch up.

"Are you sure you don't want to come to Dad's flat with me for the holiday?" Ralph asked James and Rose as the three lurked around the halls late Saturday morning. "I came to your Christmas last year, so it'd be a fair trade. Dad's going to cook a goose and everything. Of course, there won't be any singing elf heads or Winkles and Augers or anything,"

"That's all right, Ralph," James answered. "I rather prefer a Christmas *without* singing elf heads, actually. But really, I think it'd be best for us to stay here."

"It's all right not to have magic for Christmas. There's no shame in your father being a Squib," Rose said, putting her hand on Ralph's shoulder, which was rather a reach for her. "He's quite an important

man in the wizarding world these days. Head of Security and Precautionary Interference for Hogwarts, Diagon Alley, even Gringotts Bank, isn't he? Nobody else but him could do that since nobody else understands both Muggle electronics and magic like he does."

"Yeah, I know," Ralph said, grinning sheepishly. "And he's really good at it. He's helping the Ministry develop a new kind of Disillusionment Charm that only works on Muggle global positioning devices. I mean, the greatest flaw in the regular Disillusionment Charm is that a GPS device doesn't have a brain to fool. He's calling the new spell an 'Artificial Stupidity Hex'. He used to work on artificial intelligence software, so he says this is the next logical step. Once the hex is in place, it makes any Muggle positioning device see detours, roadblocks, heavy traffic, even cyclones and floods around any magical place. That way, both the Muggles and their technology will find those magical places invisible."

"That's brilliant," Rose said. "I mean, older generations of wizards never could have predicted the development of things like satellites and GPS devices and GameDecks with online chat capability. The wizarding world really needs a man like your dad to develop magical protections against things like that. He really was a godsend."

"Still," Ralph said, his face falling a little, "Dad has taken his old name again. Dolohov. He says he isn't going to let the selfishness of his father rob him of his magical heritage, but I know a little bit about that heritage, and it isn't all that great."

"You father's right," Rose said firmly. "You aren't responsible for anything your distant relatives did. I think it's very cool that your dad is changing the way people see the name Dolohov."

Ralph shrugged. "He's not changing it for *everyone*. Lots of people still hate the Dolohov name. Some of them are right here in school. Everybody knows what happened here. I mean, my uncle killed Ted Lupin's dad right downstairs. The Dolohov name is the name of murderers and traitors."

"It was awful that some of your family were so bad in the past," Rose replied, "but that was a long time ago. People shouldn't blame you for that."

Ralph sighed. "I suppose not, but they do. And honestly, I can't blame them. It's why I still go by the name Deedle. I hate my own grandparents even though they're long dead. Dad remembers them, and he wants to believe they weren't as bad as they seem. He's sort of trapped between loving them and hating them. But what kind of parents abandon their kid because he's different? What kind of people make that kid swear to never seek them out, or even talk about them?"

Rose didn't have an answer to that. The three wandered the halls aimlessly, passing tall windows, moving in and out of pools of cold winter sunlight. After a few minutes, James told Ralph and Rose about his conversation with Albus after the last Quidditch match.

"He says he didn't take the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map?" Rose said. "Do you believe him?"

James shrugged. "I don't know. He sure seemed honest about it. But he was really moody. Apparently he's pretty tight with Tabitha and her Fang and Talons cronies, and they've been telling him that I'm jealous of him, that I'm going to try to mess things up for him somehow."

"And are you?" Ralph asked.

"What?" James replied. "Oh yeah. I keep forgetting you're a Slytherin too. No, Ralph. I'm not jealous of Al, and I'm not going to try to sabotage him. I just don't want him to fall for any of Tabitha's lies. She's already got him convinced that she needs him because she's going through some mysterious personal tragedy."

Rose arched her eyebrows. "Really? What tragedy?"

"I don't know. She was all upset after the match, and not just because they lost."

"She has been pretty ugly around the common room lately," Ralph said. "She's not been her normal polite, ice queen self at all. She's snapping at people a lot, and stalking around, or sitting all by herself in the corner, mooning over parchments and books. I've even seen her send Philia and Tom Squallus away. But she doesn't send Albus away. It looks a little odd, really. I mean, she's a seventh-year and a foot taller than him. Not a likely pair, if you ask me."

"Curious," Rose said, narrowing her eyes. "I wonder what's going on with her."

"But what about the Cloak and the map?" Ralph asked. "If Albus really doesn't have them, and you don't have them, James, then who does?"

James slumped. "I don't know. Honestly, I don't care. Maybe Dad misplaced them somehow. Maybe Kreacher hid them away in his cupboard. He used to do that all the time at Grimmauld Place with all old Mrs. Black's stuff."

"You should tell your mum to check there," Rose said.

"It's not my problem, Rose," James snapped.

"It's your problem if she keeps thinking you stole them," Rose replied smoothly. "But whatever suits you. Maybe you prefer letting everyone think you're a thief."

The three stood by a window overlooking the courtyard. At the bottom of the main steps, Hagrid was loading trunks and bags onto a carriage, preparing to transport a group of students to the Hogwarts Express for their trip home. James sighed.

"I'd better go pack," Ralph said. "Dad's picking me up at the station tonight. We're spending the night in Hogsmeade so he can meet with some storeowners there, and then we're going back to London tomorrow."

"Sounds fun, Ralphinator," James said, trying to buck up a bit. "Have a good holiday. Stay out of the Shrieking Shack."

"Count on it," Ralph agreed. "I avoid anything with the word 'shrieking' in it."

13. Christmas at Hogwarts

By the next day, the school had emptied almost entirely. The corridors seemed eerily dark and silent with most of the classrooms shut and locked. As James made his way to breakfast on Sunday morning, he saw Cedric Diggory's ghost at the end of a long hall. He seemed to be in conversation with the Grey Lady. Both were floating slowly down the hall away from him. James decided not to interrupt them. Was it possible that Cedric fancied the Grey Lady? She was pretty enough, in a ghostly way, and she didn't appear to be much older than Cedric in human terms. In another sense though, she was several centuries older than Cedric, but maybe that didn't matter in the ghostly realm. Either way, it was far too bizarre for James to think about. He continued on his way to breakfast, shaking his head.

In the Great Hall, Rose was sitting at the Slytherin table with Albus. As James joined them, he heard them talking about the sale of the Burrow. It was a thoroughly depressing conversation, and James stayed out of it. Later, he suggested that the three of them go out and build snowmen in the courtyard. This was heartily agreed to, and the three spent the noon hours happily laughing and romping in the new snow. They succeeded in building a rather ridiculously large snowman, using their wands to levitate the enormous snowballs into position since they were far too heavy to lift. James and Rose attempted to levitate Albus himself up to the snowman's head to attach the carrot nose, but they were unable to keep him upright. Albus rolled over in the air until he was floating upside down. His hat fell off and plopped into the snow twelve feet below.

"Don't drop me!" he yelled, flapping his arms like an awkward bird. On the ground, wands in hand, Rose and James laughed so hard that tears squeezed from their eyes and rolled down their red cheeks.

"The carrot, Al!" Rose cried breathlessly. "Stick it in! What's the matter? Can't you fly?"

"Give me a broom and I'll fly," Albus griped, kicking his legs to turn himself upright again. "Next time, you get carrot duty, Rosie."

The three finally blundered inside as the sun lowered toward the horizon in a blaze of orange and pink. They left their snowy cloaks, hats, and gloves in a dripping trail as they made their way to the Great Hall for cocoas and afternoon snacks. James was glad of the break and the time to spend as a family. He purposely avoided talking about Merlin or the missing Invisibility Cloak and Marauder's Map.

"We should do this again next year," Rose said, smiling over her cocoa, her cheeks red. "It's sort of fun having the place to ourselves. Next year, we can get Hugo and Lucy and everybody else to stay with us."

"What about Louis?" Albus asked, smiling crookedly.

"He can stay too, I suppose, just so long as he doesn't talk," Rose said magnanimously.

"He probably wouldn't want to stay," James commented. "He went home this year with Victoire, you know. Of course, she wants to see Ted. Louis is just along for the ride."

"Are they spending all their time out at the Burrow packing?" Rose asked.

Albus shrugged morosely. "Packing's all done. Grandma Weasley managed that all by herself. I mean, how hard is packing for a witch like her? The big job is dividing everything up. Grandma and Granddad had an awful lot of stuff. And then there's the ghoul to take care of."

"Who's getting that?" Rose asked, frowning a little distastefully. "It better not end up in my mum and dad's attic."

"I bet it does," James replied, stirring his cocoa. "In fact, I bet your parents just move it into your room while you're at school. After all, it still looks quite a bit like Uncle Ron when he was our age. They may even like it better than you."

Rose rolled her eyes. "You'll have to try harder than that to get a rise out of me, James Potter."

"I bet it's in your room even now," Albus said thoughtfully, "wearing your make-up and trying on your knickers."

Rose nearly knocked her cocoa over lunging for Albus. James and Albus hooted laughter, earning an annoyed look from a house-elf cleaning a nearby window.

Time crept by surprisingly slowly as Christmas approached. James, Rose, and Albus spent the time playing Winkles and Augers in each other's common rooms, exploring the snow-covered grounds, and visiting Hagrid in his hut. Meals were taken in the company of the few remaining students and teachers, among whom were Fiera Hutchins, Hugo Paulson, and, to James' surprise, Josephina Bartlett, whose vertigo was only slightly better. She could manage sitting on a bench at the Ravenclaw table, although if she happened to drop a bread crust or a fork, she was completely unable to bend over to retrieve it. James felt a little sorry for her, but then he saw her yelling tersely at one of

the house-elves to retrieve a new fork for her and determined that her arrogance and general insufferability had not been greatly affected by her predicament.

On Christmas morning, James was rather shocked to be awakened by the smell of fresh kippers and a deep, bullfrog voice.

"A merry Christmas to you, Master James," the voice said. "Lays there like a stone, he does, like his breakfast will stay hot by pure and simple magic until he decides he's ready to eat it, which it will, of course, but only because Kreacher works so hard day and night to hone the best Warming Charms for it…"

"Kreacher?" James asked blearily, rubbing his eyes and sitting up. A tray of immaculately prepared breakfast had been laid over his legs. A black rose and a candy cane protruded from a tiny alabaster vase in the corner of the tray. "What are you doing here?"

"Sent by your dear mum, Master James," Kreacher said, bowing low. He was standing at the end of James' bed, dressed only in his tea towel despite the cold of the room. "Already served Christmas breakfasts to Master Albus and Mistress Rose. Your presents await you below."

"James!" Albus called from the common room stairs. "Come on! Kreacher won't let us unwrap anything until we're all together! Orders from Mum, of course. So chow down already!"

James bolted a few bites of the kippers and drank his pumpkin juice, thanked Kreacher, then flung himself out of bed. Rose and Albus were seated by the fire below, drinking tea and wearing green hats with jingle bells on the tips. Rose grinned and shook her head, ringing the tassels.

"Festive, eh? They came from my mum. She knew we'd not have decorated or anything. Put yours on!"

She tossed one of the hats to James. He smiled and jammed it onto his head. Kreacher came slowly down the stairs. He had also donned one of the hats, although he wore it like it weighed a hundred pounds. The hat covered his eyes. He pushed it up with a thumb, peering at James, Rose, and Albus with one eye. "All present and accounted for," he said to himself. "Merry Christmas, Masters and Mistress."

He snapped his fingers. There was a change in the light of the room and James sensed that a sort of protective field had been removed from the stack of presents. Albus whooped and leapt off the couch, attacking the biggest one with his name on it. James grinned happily and joined in.

Kreacher remained with the three until all the presents were unwrapped, then, dutifully, he collected all the cast-off wrapping paper and ribbons. He rolled the debris up, compressing it into a remarkably dense, colorful ball, and then, strangely, stuffed it inside his green tasseled hat. He put the hat back on his head while Rose struggled not to giggle at the silliness of it.

"Kreacher has been asked to inform you that your parents will speak to you tonight via Floo Network," the elf warbled. "Kreacher takes his leave of you now, Masters and Mistress. Do have a

pleasant holiday."

"You too, Kreacher," Rose said around a mouthful of gingerbread witch.

"Indeed," Kreacher replied. He raised a spindly arm and snapped his fingers. The elf vanished in a puff of greenish smoke.

"Always liked that elf," Albus proclaimed. "Knows how to keep it businesslike, he does. No beating about the bush."

Rose said, "I feel a little sorry for him. What does he get for Christmas?"

"Oh Rose, you're as bad as your mum," James replied. "Two Christmases ago, Mum and Dad tried to give Kreacher a Christmas present. It was just a little basket with a pillow in it for him to sleep on. They bought it at a Muggle pet store, because the little brute refuses to sleep in a regular bed. He didn't want to accept it though, and when they insisted he keep it, he wouldn't even use it like he was supposed to. He's been using it ever since as a basket for carrying around the laundry!"

"Honestly, Rose," Albus agreed, "Kreacher isn't made to be happy. We try. We really do. Especially Dad. Kreacher and him have a sort of history."

"I know," Rose said. "He just seems so miserable."

"Hah!" James exclaimed. "This is ecstatic by Kreacher's standards. I've heard about what he was like when Dad first inherited him. Kreacher sent him a box of maggots for a Christmas present."

"He didn't!" Rose gasped, covering her mouth.

Albus pulled a homemade green and silver scarf out of one of his unwrapped boxes. He threw it around his neck. "Trust us, Rosie. This is Kreacher happy. Otherwise, we'd have gotten leeches for breakfast instead of kippers."

That afternoon, Albus took James and Rose down to the cellars and showed them the Slytherin's spell-casting range. Just as Albus had described, the room was long and low with clockwork dummies installed against the far wall. Albus illustrated how the range worked by whipping out his wand and shooting a Stinging Hex at one of the dummies. It lifted its wooden arms and shook them in a parody of pain, as if it were being peppered with bee stings. Albus repeated the spell, laughing. James laughed as well, but a little nervously. Rose didn't laugh at all. She looked distastefully at Albus and crossed her arms.

Christmas dinner in the Great Hall was as resplendent as any dinner James had ever attended despite the fact that the room was only a fifth full. Professors Knossus Shert and Lucia Heretofore, the new Potions teacher and Head of Slytherin House, were seated at the table on the dais. Hagrid sat between them, talking loudly and looking like what he was: a half-giant between two rather slight people. Heretofore looked obviously disgusted by Hagrid, although she masked it behind a thin smile. To

James' surprise, Petra Morganstern was seated in the middle of the Gryffindor table, smiling slightly as Hagrid attempted to lead his fellow professors in a round of Christmas carols.

"I didn't know you were here for Christmas," James said, sitting down at the table across from Petra.

"Yeah," Rose agreed, "where've you been?"

"I went down to Hogsmeade for a few days," Petra answered. "Did a little shopping. No point in moping around here all holiday."

"Why didn't you go home for Christmas?" Rose asked.

Petra shrugged, still smiling up at the dais. "No point, really. I already got my present, didn't I?"

James raised his eyebrows. "You mean that box that came by Ministry owl last month? We were all wondering about that. It came from your dad?"

Petra nodded and sipped her Butterbeer. "Madam Rosmerta had this shipped from the Three Broomsticks for tonight. Did you know that? I talked to her yesterday."

"So what did you get for Christmas?" Albus asked. "I got a new scarf, a box of sweets, and a Remembrall. Honestly, Mum should've given the Remembrall to James so he could keep track of Quidditch try-outs." He grinned at James.

Petra looked at Albus, still smiling. "It was just some stuff. It wouldn't mean much to anyone but me."

"So that's why you ran off to open it by yourself," Albus commented. Rose kicked him under the table.

Petra shrugged. "It's nice to have some time by ourselves, isn't it? I'm taking the time to learn my lines. Would you like to rehearse a little, James? Professor Curry would probably put us in her will if we came back from break knowing all of our lines."

"Sure!" James said, a little too enthusiastically. He modulated his tone and added, "I mean, whatever. If you want to. I don't have much else planned."

"You don't have *anything* else planned," Albus smirked. "What, you have an interview with the Minister of Magic we don't know about? Ow! And Rose, you can stop kicking me under the table already!"

Petra grinned at Albus, then James. "I'll see you later in the common room. Bring your script and we'll read through it, all right?"

James nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Petra left, walking slowly, thoughtfully.

"James is in love with his leading lady," Albus mocked, making kissing noises.

"I'm not in love with her, you prat," James scowled, pretending it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard.

"Oh James, you're not fooling anyone," Rose said, shaking her head. "It's obvious. It's kind of cute, actually."

"Shut up!" James said, blushing furiously. "Just because I have to pretend to be in love with her for the play doesn't mean it's happened for real! Maybe I'm just a very good actor!"

Rose tried to mask a grin. "Well, then, you really are getting into your role, aren't you? I had no idea you were so dedicated to the craft. It's a good thing you aren't scripted to murder anyone."

James rolled his eyes dramatically. "You're both completely daft. Think whatever you want."

Albus studied James for a moment, and then made more kissing noises at him. "Oh Petra, I'm just a boy, but you make me feel like such a man!"

James grabbed a roll and hurled it at Albus, who collapsed into delighted laughter.

When James returned to the common room a little while later, leaving Rose and Albus singing Christmas carols with Hagrid in the Great Hall, he was pleased and a bit flustered to find Petra sitting in a chair near the fire, script in hand. He ran up the steps to his dormitory, retrieved his own copy of the script from his satchel, and tramped back downstairs again, telling himself the entire time not to be a fool, that Rose and Albus certainly couldn't be right about his falling in love with Petra, and most of all, that even if it was true, it was preposterous to think she could ever return those feelings. She was nearly five years older than James, smart as could be, and totally stunning. Girls like Petra simply did not fancy gawky younger boys who still hadn't managed the knack of an Anti-Pimple Charm. James' face was flushed by the time he rejoined Petra, plopping onto a nearby couch.

"Alas, my dear Treus," Petra quoted, turning a page in her script, "thou doth set mine heart aflutter. Shall we start from the top?"

James began to answer, but his voice came out as a squeak. He cleared his throat. "Yeah. Sure. I'll read whoever you're talking to, and you can do the same for me."

"I can do a pretty good Donovan," Petra agreed. "I even considered trying out for the part."

"And I suppose Noah could've played Astra?" James grinned.

Petra nodded. "A century ago, men often played the roles of women in these kinds of plays. Some places didn't even allow women to act at all. Turnabout is fair play, I'd say. Besides, sometimes I think it'd be fun to act the part of the evil rogue with the awesome powers. Women are always the pawns in these stories."

James thought she was possibly the prettiest pawn he'd ever seen, but he determined not to say it. He cleared his throat again and began to read aloud. Two hours later, once they'd finished the read-through, James noticed that Albus and Rose had entered the common room. They were seated at a rear table with Hugo Paulson, who was teaching Albus some Winkles and Augers techniques. James caught Rose looking at him furtively, a small smile on her lips.

"Hey, James," Albus called, pocketing his wand. "Remember, we're supposed to be talking to Mum and Dad via Floo Network tonight. Or should I tell them you have more pressing matters to attend to?"

James glared at Albus, who simply grinned back at him.

"It's fine, James," Petra sighed, closing her script. "I've had enough of this for tonight anyway. I'm going to head upstairs and write some Christmas letters. Thanks for the help."

"It was fun," James agreed. "See you around, Petra."

As James watched Petra cross the room to the girls' dormitory stairs, Rose joined him on the couch.

"You really should be careful, James," she said in a quiet voice.

James barely heard her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Petra's not in a position to respond the way you'd like her to."

"I don't know what you're talking about," James insisted, finally turning around and closing his script. "We were just rehearsing."

"It isn't just the age difference, you know. That's not that big of a deal in the long run. You need to realize that Petra's heart is obviously elsewhere."

James furrowed his brow and looked at Rose. "What's that mean?"

"Well, it's obvious, James," Rose said, lowering her voice even further. "Petra didn't go down to Hogsmeade to do any shopping, no matter what she said. She was hoping to catch Ted before he left for the Burrow."

"Why would she do that?" James asked, blinking.

Rose rolled her eyes and shook her head. "She's still in love with him, you prat. She's broken-hearted that he left her for Victoire."

"But Noah said that she never really loved him," James said, frowning. "He said she knew all along that he wasn't a good match for her."

"She may say that, but the heart does what it wants, doesn't it? She loves Ted. It's obvious. I just don't want you to do or say anything that could ruin your friendship with her. I don't want to see you get hurt."

James slumped back against the couch. "What do you think I am, Rose? A complete idiot? Even if what you say is true, I'd never say anything about it to Petra."

"Sorry, James. Unrequited love is as poison to the soul, isn't it?"

"Ha, ha," James replied crossly. "That's Treus' line in act two. You're very funny."

"Look," Albus yelled, jumping up from the table in the corner. "The grate! Hi, Dad! Happy Christmas!"

"Happy Christmas to you, son," Harry Potter's face grinned from the coals of the fireplace.

"Hi, Uncle Harry," Rose chimed, climbing off the couch to kneel in front of the grate. "How's everything going at the Burrow?"

Harry seemed to shrug. "As well as can be expected, I suppose. It's not the way any of us would prefer to spend the holiday, but today was all right. Lily is staying with Andromeda Tonks, and everyone here sends their love. Kreacher says you all looked well enough. Did you like your presents?"

"I love the scarf," Albus replied. "And the Remembrall. And the sweets were great too."

"Don't tell me you ate them all already, son,"

"I did, but don't tell Mum. I'm a growing boy, Dad. Got to keep bulked up for Quidditch!"

Albus and Harry spent a few minutes discussing the Quidditch season, and Harry congratulated Albus on making Slytherin Seeker even though he admitted he was glad Gryffindor had so far edged them out of the tournament.

"There's a whole line of people who want to say hi," Harry said. "Quit pushing, Hermione!"

Harry's face sank out of the coals and was replaced a moment later by Hermione's distinctive features and thick hair. "Happy Christmas, Rosie," she cried, "and you too, James and Albus. Are you all doing well?"

"Well enough," James said. "It's been a mad year so far. It's a lot to explain."

Rose grinned at her mother. "James is right. We have an awful lot to tell you about. Our first week here, Merlin took us for a hundred-kilometer walk through the woods to go and get this magical box of all his stuff, and—"

"Just a moment, Rosie," Hermione said. "Ron, I'll ask in a minute. And do you really want to eat that biscuit? How many have you had?"

Hermione's face vanished from the grate. A second later, Ron's grin surfaced. "Hey, Rosie! Are these two taking good care of you? 'Cause if they aren't…"

"Hi, Uncle Ron," Albus said happily. Ron had always been Albus' favorite. "I'm a Slytherin!"

"Hi, Dad," Rose grinned. "How's Hugo?"

"Everyone is fine here, considering everything," Ron said, his grin fading. "Ted and Charlie got in a fight over something Victoire said, although nobody seems all that sure what it was. George drank a little too much Firewhisky, tripped over the ghoul, and broke his left pinky finger on some trunks. And your Grandmother is either yelling at everybody or breaking down in tears. It's a glorious Christmas all round. Come to think of it, do you blokes have a spare bed there? I think I'd even be willing to bunk out with you in the Slytherin quarters, Al."

"Yeah!" Albus agreed instantly. "Come on over by Floo! You can have Ralph's bed!"

From behind Ron, Aunt Fleur's voice said, "You are not going anywhere, Ron Weasley."

"It was a joke, Fleur. Bloody hell."

Ron's face sank out of the coals. There seemed to be some commotion, then Ginny appeared.

"Hi, boys! Hi, Rose! Happy Christmas!" she said, smiling.

"What's going on over there, Mum?" Albus asked. "Sounds like quite a ruckus."

Ginny sighed. "You three are lucky you aren't here. It's just not a very nice way to spend Christmas. Fortunately, most everything is packed and moved out. We saved the beds for last so we can spend the night, but tomorrow morning, we'll take them away too. How are the three of you doing?"

James, Rose, and Albus told Ginny they were doing fine. Rose asked, "So what's it like? I can't bear to think of the Burrow all empty. What's Grandmother going to do?"

"It's fine, actually," Ginny said, but not very convincingly. "I mean, yes, it's sad. Most of us have been coming here all our lives. But it's for the best, really. Everybody knows that. Grandma Weasley will be staying with us for the time being. We have plenty of room, especially now that you two are out of the house," she indicated James and Albus with her eyes. "But still. Your father packed up Granddad

Weasley's garage all by himself. I couldn't bear to look at it all. He was very strong about it though. I'm… I'm very proud of him."

Ginny stopped abruptly. She sniffed and looked down for a moment. Then, with a different expression, she looked up again. "How's Slytherin treating you, Albus? Do they feed you well?"

Albus laughed. "Mum, we all eat together in the Great Hall. You know that. It isn't like Slytherins have a secret dining room or anything."

"Well, I was never in the Slytherin quarters, you know. I didn't know they had a spell-casting range either. But they're taking good care of you?"

"Sure, Mum," Albus said, smiling. "I like it there."

"And what about you, James?" Ginny asked, turning to her oldest son.

"I'm fine," James answered blandly, not quite looking at his mum. "I got your Howler. Sort of."

"I'm sorry, James," Ginny said. "I was very angry when I sent that. There was more to it than just the missing Cloak and map. I know that now. This is a very stressful time for us all here. It just wasn't a good time to pull something like that again."

"I didn't take them, Mum!" James said suddenly, desperately wanting his mum to believe him. "I thought Albus must have done it, but he says he didn't take them either!"

Ginny studied James' face for a long moment. "Well, if neither of you took them, where have they gone?" she asked reasonably.

"How should I know?" James answered, a little mollified. "Maybe Kreacher hid them away in his cupboard. You know how he used to do that with old Mrs. Black's things when he thought they needed protecting. Have you checked his cupboard?"

Ginny exhaled wearily. "No. Honestly, it didn't occur to me. I hope you are right, James. Are you absolutely sure you're telling me the truth, son?"

"Yes, Mum! I promise! I didn't touch them this time."

"And you, Albus? You don't know anything about it?"

Albus shrugged. "First I heard about it was when James' Howler went off at breakfast. Then James nearly tackled me after the last Quidditch match, accusing me of setting him up. That's all I know about it, Mum."

Ginny shook her head dismissively. "Then I'm sure they'll turn up. I'll ask Kreacher about it. Maybe he took your doll too, James. He may have them all together down there in his little collection."

"My doll?" James asked.

"Yes," Ginny answered, distracted by something going on elsewhere in the Burrow. "The little James doll you gave me last year at the end of school. It went missing at the same time as the Cloak and map, but I just assumed I'd misplaced it. I wasn't as worried about that. I mean, why would you sneak your doll back to school with you?"

Rose had turned to look at James, her eyebrows raised in alarm.

"Oh, and James," Ginny said, interrupting herself, "did you talk to Zane?"

James blinked, his thoughts racing. "What? Zane? No, not lately."

"He showed up in the Burrow earlier today. Well, I say 'showed up'. He sort of, er, materialized. We had to shoot him with Stunning Spells to keep him visible. Those Americans have some really curious methods of communication, don't they? Anyway, he thought you'd be here along with Rose. He said he really needed to talk to you. He asked me to tell you to keep an eye out for him."

James nodded. "Sure, Mum. OK."

"Well, I really should go," Ginny said. "Grandma says happy Christmas, and she'd love to chat, but we already packed the floor rug and kneeling on the hearthstones is too hard on her knees. Take care of each other. Rose, make sure those two eat something green every now and then. And be sure to keep up with your studies, you two!"

"Yes, Mum," Albus and James said in unison.

Ginny smiled mistily. "I love you, all three of you. Goodnight and happy Christmas!"

Ron and Hermione each made one more appearance in the fireplace, saying their goodbyes. Finally, Harry appeared once more. He smiled wearily. "Take care, you three. You're not getting into any trouble, are you?"

"No more than you would've," Albus smirked.

"Dad," James said, "I didn't take the Cloak and map this time."

"I know, James. Your mother already told me. I believe you."

"But who has them, then?"

"You leave that to me," Harry smiled. "I'm Head Auror, remember? What kind of Auror would I be if I let something like the Invisibility Cloak slip out of my hands? If you don't have them, then they're probably lost under the bed back at home, or in the bottom of the clothes hamper. They'll turn up."

"But Dad," James said, lowering his voice, "what about the voodoo doll I got from Professor Jackson

last year? That's me! Mum says it's gone missing too!"

Harry seemed to understand James' concern. "Those things don't work like they show in the Muggle films, son. You'll be all right. Your mum liked it a lot though. She squeezed it every night."

"I know," James said, smiling slightly. "I felt her squeezes, a little."

Harry's smile widened. "Don't worry about it, James. It'll turn up. Things always do, no matter how lost they seem. It's a rule of life."

James nodded. "Thanks, Dad."

"Good night, all of you," Harry said. "Happy Christmas. Now go get some rest."

"You too," Rose answered. "Give everyone our love. Squeeze Lily for us when you see her next."

Harry nodded. "I will, Rose." He glanced at James and Albus, smiling proudly, and then he was gone. The coals reverted to a senseless strew.

"Sounds as if we made the right choice staying here," Albus commented, climbing to his feet. "I wonder what will happen to all of Granddad's things. What about his flying Ford?"

James sighed. "What's it matter? Granddad's the one that gave all those things any meaning. Without him, they're all just… stuff."

Albus glared at James but didn't seem to know what to say.

Rose stood up and brushed off her knees. "I'm sure your dad won't just throw it all away," she soothed. "Granddad spent years collecting those things. It's all part of our memory of him. Uncle Harry will find a place for it all."

"Nobody found a place for the Burrow," Albus said quietly. "Now it's empty, and pretty soon, it'll be torn down." There was no response to that. A moment later, Albus went on, "I'm heading back downstairs. I'll see you both tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Albus," Rose replied, nodding. As Albus disappeared through the portrait hole, Rose turned to James, her eyes sharp.

"Your voodoo doll's gone missing too! This could be serious!"

"You heard Dad. He says it's all right. He says they don't work like they do in the Muggle flicks. It's not like anyone who finds it can use it to pull my arms off or make me do things I don't want to do."

"Voodoo is a really secret art," Rose said, shaking her head. "And Madame Delacroix is one of the best voodoo witches there is. You don't know what that doll is capable of, and neither does your dad. Not really. You have to be really careful with things like that."

"What do you think I'm going to do, Rose? I can't just magically find the bloody thing. It probably did just fall down behind the headboard in Mum and Dad's room."

"I wouldn't be willing to take that chance if I was you," Rose said gravely. "Not until you know for sure what that doll is capable of."

"You make it sound like it's alive," James said, grinning a little nervously. Rose merely stuck her hands on her hips and cocked her head as if to say how do you know it's not?.

"I'll look into it," a voice said from behind Rose, causing her to jump a foot into the air.

"Zane Walker!" she cried, spinning and clutching her hand to her heart. "Stop doing that! You scared me half to death!"

"Sorry," Zane said, "it's hard to knock with Doppelganger hands. They just go right through things."

"Hey, Zane, Happy Christmas," James smiled, turning on the couch to face the half-transparent form. "You need a zap?"

"Yeah, if you don't mind. I'm managing this message all by myself. I didn't want anyone else to hear it."

James produced his wand and shot the ghostly figure of Zane with a Stinging Hex. The Doppelganger pulsed to something resembling a solid shape.

"So? Aunt Ginny tells us you were looking for us at the Burrow," Rose said crossly, plopping back onto the couch. "What's so important that you needed to interrupt us on Christmas Day?"

"I was worried about you," Zane said seriously. "I wanted to warn you, but then I found out that you'd stayed here at the school, and I knew everything would be all right. For now, at least."

James frowned. "What are you talking about? Why wouldn't we be safe? I mean, relatively speaking, considering the Gatekeeper is loose on the earth and all that."

Zane's face was very pale and grave. "Remember when we talked in the barn a couple of weeks ago? Rose, you told me all about how Merlin had been tricked by that guy, Hadyn, a thousand years ago. He said Merlin would get his fiancée back if he doubled Hadyn's lands and fortified his castle, making it so that Merlin himself couldn't even attack anyone inside it."

"Yeah," James said, shrugging. "So?"

"So, Merlin knows somebody broke into his office a few weeks ago. He knows that person zapped themselves into his Magic Mirror and probably found out some not-so-nice things about him. And Merlin probably knows that that person was you, James. So haven't you wondered why he hasn't said boo to you about any of it?"

"Well," James answered slowly, "like you said that day in the barn, if Merlin was evil, he'd have come for us. The fact that he hasn't must mean he isn't as bad as he could be. Maybe, somehow, he's on the good side after all, and he knows we are too. Maybe he's letting us go because he knows we're trying to help fight the Gatekeeper." Even as James said it, it sounded false to him. In his heart, he didn't believe it, but he couldn't think of any other reason that Merlin wouldn't have come for them.

Zane was shaking his head. "That's what I thought at the time. But then I thought about the conversation that happened between Slytherin and Merlin, back when he had you locked in his laboratory. You said that they talked about the deal Hadyn had tricked Merlin into making, and they made it pretty clear that Hogwarts is the castle Hadyn lived in when he made the deal. Don't you see what that means?"

Rose's eyes widened. "It means Hogwarts is the castle Merlin fortified. It can't be breached from outside," she said, nodding. "That would explain how even Voldemort and his forces were kept out for so long back during the battle. Merlin's protective spells were still in effect, although they were probably weakened a bit after a thousand years."

"It would also explain how the secret entrances just keep opening up again over time," James agreed, awed. "Like the one beneath the Whomping Willow! It's like the castle heals itself when it's been damaged! Merlin's magical fortifications are still at work after all these centuries! Even the new parts seem to have gotten it. Even the parts that were built *after* Merlin cast his spells over the castle! The new bits have inherited his protection!"

Zane was still shaking his head somberly. "You're still missing the most important part. We've been assuming that Merlin hadn't attacked you three because he was on your side or he was letting you figure things out for some reason. We'd assumed he was letting you go because he was essentially good. But we forgot the most interesting part of the deal Hadyn made with Merlin."

Rose suddenly gasped and covered her mouth. James' eyes widened, remembering. It had been right in front of him the whole time. Slytherin himself had said it, that night in his office a thousand years ago: you are unable to touch the hair of anyone residing within this castle, Slytherin had said, your threats are formidable, but fortunately, they are to no effect here.

"He can't hurt anyone inside the walls of the castle," James whispered. "It was the last part of Hadyn's deal, because Hadyn knew that Merlin would try to have his revenge on him. That's why Merlin had to wait until Hadyn was on a journey in his coach. Only then could Merlin attack him."

James looked at Rose. Her hand was still over her mouth and her face had entirely drained of color.

"May I be so bold as to suggest," Zane said, looking very meaningfully at both of them, "that none of you go on any journeys for the time being?"

James' first concern had been Ralph, who was indeed travelling over the holiday, staying with his dad at his flat in London. Zane assured them that he'd already been to see Ralph, warning him to keep his wand handy and try to never be alone.

"He wasn't very happy about it," Zane explained, "especially since his wand is a chunk of Merlin's staff. He thinks he won't be able to use it on Merlin if it comes down to it. He might be right too, but I didn't tell him that."

"But it's his wand now," Rose insisted. "He won it. It's his to use however he wishes."

Zane wasn't so certain. "This is old magic, Rose. It isn't like Ralph battled Merlin and won his wand. The staff was broken up, and Ralph only got a part of it. It still remembers when it was whole, and knows Merlin is still master of the rest of it. You might be right, but we can't assume what is true of a whole wand is true of a partial staff."

"Definitely don't tell Ralph that," James said. "He's nervous enough already, and he'll never know the truth unless it comes down to a fight. It'd be best if he truly believed his wand was his entirely. It might actually help make it true."

Zane nodded. "In the meantime, I'll check with Madame Delacroix about your voodoo doll. I'll try to get her to tell me what it can do. After all, she's the one that made it."

Rose asked, "You can talk to her?"

"Sure. She's right here on the grounds, on the psychiatric floor of the Poe Medical College. They keep her under lock and key, but she's allowed visitors. She's pretty dotty after that whole experience in the Grotto Keep, but I bet she remembers me. And a big chunk of log." Zane grinned a little wickedly.

"I doubt it will come to that again," Rose said, rolling her eyes. "But it might help loosen her tongue. After all, it was one of your presidents that said to speak softly and carry a big stick."

"Yeah," Zane agreed, "big sticks are a specialty of mine."

After that, Zane wished James and Rose a goodnight and Merry Christmas. He apparently had a Christmas party to go to himself, since it was quite a lot earlier where he was. He broke into a rather rude Christmas carol and vanished halfway through the chorus.

James and Rose said goodnight as well and went their separate ways, climbing the stairs to their dormitories. It occurred to James that he had the second-years' dormitory all to himself during the

holiday, and it worried him a little. He reminded himself that if what Zane said was true, Merlin couldn't harm him inside the walls of Hogwarts. Still, the thought that Merlin might actually *desire* to harm James, as well as Rose and Ralph, was slightly terrifying. It was one thing to have a nebulous, generic enemy floating loose on the earth, but it was another thing entirely to have a specific enemy under the same roof as you, and to know that that enemy was one of the most powerful sorcerers ever. Fortunately, after the day's activities in the snow and the stresses of his conversations with Petra and his parents, James was exhausted enough not to care. Besides, James had a vague sense that Cedric was watching out for him. If Merlin came for James, Cedric would find a way to warn him first. Thinking that, James fell into a deep sleep.

He had the dream again, and it was clearer than ever. There was the flash and swish of blades and the rattle of old machinery. There was the flickering pool and the sad faces of the young man and woman. Worst of all, there was the keening voice of the dark shape in the shadows, constantly enticing, promising, instructing. A sense of deep sadness pervaded the dream, but under the sadness, like sharp knives under a soft blanket, there was anger. It was a cold, pulsing rage, broad as the sky and deep as the ocean. And finally, for the first time, James saw his companion, reflected in the rippling surface of the pool; a silhouette and a hint of a face. He still didn't know where the pool was or where this secret, hidden place was buried, but he finally had a sense of who this tormented person was. Long, raven hair hung past piercing eyes. The eyes were like coals: hard and cold, but concealing a fire that could burn anything and everything.

"You have cursed," the voice of the shadows said softly, evilly. "You have tested the waters, yes. But you must perform the ultimate rite to become truly worthy. You must make a sacrifice so great that there will be no turning back. You must take from those who took from you. It will be a hard and painful path, and only you can walk it, but it is the price of balance. You must be willing to tread that path for all those who will come after you. And for that sacrifice, they will honor your memory. They will sing of you. Your story will become legend. And through that legend, you will live forever, no matter what happens to your mortal form. Through your trials, justice will be achieved. Those you've lost will be returned. Their blood will be repaid in the only way that it can be: with more blood. It is your duty and your honor."

"It is my honor," the raven-haired figure answered in a cold, calm voice. A tear dripped from the figure's chin and struck the pool, where it steamed.

James slept on. And in the morning, he barely remembered the dream. But his phantom scar throbbed worryingly, and James wondered about it, knowing it meant something, but unable to quite work out what. He made his way down to breakfast, and by the time he entered the Great Hall, the pain in his forehead had gone entirely. Albus and Rose were seated at the Gryffindor table with Hugo and Petra, and all of them were engaged in raucous conversation. James joined them, smiling happily.

By the time breakfast was over, he'd completely forgotten the dream.

14. Artis Decerto

The Christmas holiday ended strangely for James. Since neither he, Rose nor Albus had gone anywhere, there was no doleful return trip. Instead, it felt as if school returned to them. On the Sunday when most of the students arrived back from their travels, James and Rose sat in a sunny window seat overlooking the courtyard. Silently, they watched bundled classmates unloading their bags and trunks, lugging them up the steps to the main entrance. The enormous snowman James, Rose, and Albus had erected was becoming soft in a sudden thaw. Its carrot nose drooped sadly and one of its stick arms had fallen off. Melting snow dripped steadily from the castle roofs and balconies. James felt rather glad that the holidays were over and looked forward to resuming classes and drama rehearsals.

Strangely enough, none of them had seen Merlin at all during the entire holiday. James had passed Professor McGonagall in the hall outside her office, and she had informed him that, as far as she knew, Merlin had spent the holiday at the castle.

"It isn't as if the Headmaster has any family, you know," she'd commented. "And one can only assume that his Christmas traditions would be rather different than ours, at any rate. Besides, Headmaster Ambrosius is a very private man, as you may have noticed. If he had any plans, I doubt he'd have told any of us."

Classes began again and James noticed that the second half of the term had a rather different tone than the first. Especially with the older students, there was a noticeably more serious attitude about homework and studies. All in all, it made James glad he was not yet old enough to participate in O.W.L. or N.E.W.T. examinations.

As Defence Against the Dark Arts classes resumed, Professor Debellows introduced techniques from a form of magical martial arts called *Artis Decerto*. James' attitude about such things had been rather transformed by his encounter with Salazar Slytherin on the top of the Sylvven Tower, where he'd surprised himself by putting Debellows physical defensive techniques to very good use. He paid close attention to the new moves, which looked quite a lot like dancing, but were actually a method of keeping one's body light and flexible, allowing for impressive displays of spell dodging. As an example, Debellows invited the class to form a line and make their wands ready. One by one, each student was to attempt to Disarm, Stun, or Sting Debellows. "Your choice," the professor said, grinning and hopping lightly from foot to foot.

"This is finally getting good," Trenton Bloch muttered, fingering his wand.

As the first spells began to fire, Debellows dodged them with amazing, almost effortless ease. He barely seemed to be watching the line of students. He simply glanced once as each person in the line raised their wand, then he'd turn, lunge, duck, or even pirouette, allowing the spell to flit past him harmlessly, usually missing him by mere inches. James had to admit that it was a rather amazing display, but he was determined that his spell would strike its mark. He decided he would aim directly for Debellows' feet since they, at least, were usually attached to the floor. When his turn came, James raised his wand, aimed fleetingly for Debellows chest, and then, as quickly as he could, pointed downwards and fired. Even as the spell shot from his wand, Debellows was in the air, turning lightly. James' Stunning Spell snuffed itself out on Debellows' shadow. A moment later, the big man came down on his hands and the tips of his toes, as if he was doing a push-up. With a heave and a grunt, he flung himself upright again, landing easily on his feet. Deftly, he caught his own wand, which he had lobbed upwards during his leap.

"Bluh-dee hell!" Graham Warton cried. Amazed applause rippled over the students.

Kendra Corner raised her hand. "How long before we can do that?"

"Patience, students," Debellows called, chuckling and mopping his brow with a towel. "Artis Decerto is a lifetime study. It is much more than a physical art; it is a mental discipline. It incorporates the skills of levitation, divination, and even Apparition, allowing the wizard to know when and where his opponent is going to strike and not to be there when it happens. Only the clumsiest wizard relies solely on the strength of his spells. The ablest wizard knows that if he plays the game well, he need not use spells at all."

James decided that, as unlikable as Debellows was, Artis Decerto was a technique well worth learning. He devoted himself to the practice drills and mental exercises Debellows prescribed even though they seemed hopelessly difficult and abstract.

"Know your opponent better than he knows himself," Debellows commanded. "It need not take years of study; most wizards know very little of themselves. Gauge them in an instant. Take their measure. If you succeed in this, you will always have the upper hand, for you will know what they are going to do before they do themselves. You will already be preparing your defence, and eventually, your counter-attack."

"When do we get to that part?" Trenton said, lowering his wand in frustration. "I'm sick of trying to read the other bloke's mind. I want to magic something."

"In time, Mr. er, young man," Debellows replied, waving a hand. "First, you must understand the logistics of battle. No action should be taken unless you have already foreseen the outcome. Planning and deliberation are key! Magic is but one of the choices available to the cunning wizard. At every stage of the battle, there are three options a warrior may choose. The first choice is to curse his opponent."

Kevin Murdock pointed his wand at his drill partner and mimed a Killing Curse. "Kapow! You're dead! That's what we've been waiting for," he said cheerfully.

"A wholesale and clumsy response, my friend," Debellows said. "Perhaps you'd like to try that technique on me?"

Murdock's face reddened as he remembered the way Debellows had dodged the myriad spells. He shook his head quickly, lowering his wand.

Debellows nodded once. "Good choice, boy. You have just illustrated the second option a wizard may choose in battle: to wait and watch for his opponent to make the next move. The cunning warrior will be able to exploit his opponent's action and use it against him. If any of you ever see battle, you will likely find yourselves facing an untrained and undisciplined enemy: an enemy who believes that either bravery, power, or enthusiasm will be enough to see him to victory. Get the measure of this enemy, wait for him to make his move, and know it the moment he does. If you succeed in those things, then the battle is already in your hands."

Trenton Bloch rolled his eyes, obviously unsatisfied. "What's the third option, then?"

"The third option, my friends," Debellows said, raising his eyebrows, "is to turn around and walk away."

"The third option is to retreat?" Morgan Patonia asked, frowning.

Debellows shook his head, smiling grimly. "Not at all. A true warrior never retreats. But a true warrior *does* know when a battle is not worth fighting. This might be because the enemy is too great, or because the enemy is too weak. Either way, there is no valor in such a battle. The sign of a true warrior, students, is knowing when not to fight."

"Inspiring stuff," Trenton muttered, unimpressed. James glanced at him, then back at Debellows. He understood Trenton's annoyance, and yet, after the duel against Salazar Slytherin in the distant past, James realized he wasn't quite as quick to dismiss Debellows' methods as he had been before.

As spring began to descend on the school grounds, Neville Longbottom started taking his Herbology classes on wandering field trips, teaching them how to identify certain magical plants and trees in the wild. The class slogged reluctantly behind as he led them along the perimeter of the Forbidden Forest and into the marshy shores of the lake.

"Many magical plants have adapted to Muggle environments by disguising themselves as something rather more innocuous," Neville called happily, kneeling by the edge of the lake. "For instance, this breed of spynuswort has acclimated to life in Muggle areas by disguising itself as stinging nettles, thus assuring no Muggles will attempt to pull it up or harvest it. You can tell the difference by the slight purple hue on the bottom of the leaf. Once the plant is pulled up, however," Neville gripped the stem and gently tugged it, drawing the root out of the wet earth, "you can see the characteristic taproot of the spynuswort plant, useful for any number of potions and elixirs."

"I'm not seeing the taproot," Ashley Doone said, examining the uprooted plant in her own hands. "Just a big root ball."

Neville looked up. "Er, that's because that particular plant, Miss Doone, is not so much spynuswort disguised as stinging nettles as it is stinging nettles disguised as, er, itself."

"Yah!" Ashley cried, dropping the plant and brushing her hands violently on her robes.

"To the hospital wing," Neville announced, sighing. "Madam Curio has a salve for repelling the stings, but you'd best hurry or you'll be smarting for hours."

Ralph and James watched Ashley bolt off toward the castle, her robes flying.

Ralph said to James, "Are we all set for Defence Club tonight?"

"I guess," James answered. "I've barely seen Scorpius since the holiday. Frankly, I think he's running out of things to teach us."

"You think so? I've learned loads of useful spells from him. That grandfather of his really must have known his stuff."

"Yeah, well, that grandfather of his was one of the worst people my dad ever knew," James replied. "Lucius Malfoy was a Death Eater. He's one of the few who never recanted either, even though old Voldy's long since dead. He's in hiding now, probably still waiting for the rise of the pureblood empire. He knew plenty of dark magic, including all three Unforgivable Curses."

Ralph shrugged. "Well, wherever Scorpius learned it from, I'm glad he did. Considering what's going on with Merlin and this Gatekeeper thing, I'm glad to learn as many curses and hexes as I can."

"I don't know," James said, lowering his voice. "I'm starting to wonder if we're going about this all wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," James said, sighing, "what if Debellows is right about what makes a great magical fighter? What if we're spending too much time just learning curses and hexes and Disarming Spells? Maybe we should start practicing some of those Artis Decerto techniques he's been showing us."

Ralph shook his head. "I can't do stuff like that, James. Look at me. Zane was right. I'm a brick wall."

"You're no bigger than Debellows, and you saw what he did, dodging all those spells, moving like he knew exactly where every bolt was going to be. He made it look really easy!"

"Yeah, I know about things that look really easy. Turns out they aren't. He said Artis Decerto was a lifetime study."

"So what else you got planned for the rest of your life?" James asked, grinning. "You want to be great at something or what?"

Ralph smiled crookedly. "You think Scorpius can even teach us that stuff?"

"Only one way to find out," James replied, arching an eyebrow.

But neither Ralph nor James saw Scorpius for the rest of the day. As they walked to the gym for the Defence Club meeting, Rose was rather enthusiastic about using the club to practice Artis Decerto techniques.

"You know he's hardly even teaching it to the girls," she fumed. "Debellows is a first-class cretin when it comes to women in combat roles. Some of the best fighters in history have been witches! Hasn't he ever heard of Chloris the Clobberer? Or Ghia von Guggenheim? Or for that matter, Bellatrix Lestrange and the woman who defeated her, Grandma Weasley?"

"He may *not* have heard of Grandma Weasley," Ralph answered thoughtfully. "But you have a point."

"A woman is arguably more inclined to being good at Artis Decerto," Rose went on. "We're more graceful by nature. And more intuitive."

"Maybe you should teach it, then," James said with a straight face.

"Maybe I should," Rose replied, glaring at him.

The three turned into the gymnasium and stopped. Most of the club members were cheering and shouting, gathered in a raucous throng near the line of clockwork dummies. Green flashes lit the group, but James couldn't see where they were coming from.

James and Rose ran forward, pushing into the throng. James, being taller than Rose, saw what was happening first. The assembled students had formed a semicircle around Tabitha Corsica, Philia Goyle, and Albus. The three Slytherins were smiling happily as they fired green bolts at one of the mechanical target dummies. The dummy thrashed and writhed, spitting tiny cogs and springs, wracking loose of its frame.

"Stop it!" Rose yelled, her cheeks bright red. "What do you think you're doing? Stop it this instant!"

Tabitha whispered an incantation, shooting one more spell at the dummy, and then raised her wand easily. She turned to peer back over her shoulder at the newcomers. "Good evening, Rose, James," she said. "Is there a sign-up parchment we should attend to? We'd hate to bypass any of the necessary formalities."

"What kind of spells were those?" Rose demanded, planting her fists on her hips.

"Calm down, Rosie," Albus said, pocketing his wand. "We were just having a little fun. It's just a

dummy, you know."

"You were using *Killing Curses*," Rose said, wheeling on Albus. "How dare you? You can't just come into this club and start using Unforgivable Curses, especially that one! You'll get us all expelled!"

"The law is rather vague when it comes to practicing Unforgivable Curses on inanimate objects, Rose," Tabitha said, smiling indulgently. "Besides, what's the point of a Defence Club if you aren't going to practice useful defensive techniques?"

"Killing someone is your idea of a defensive technique?" James spat.

Tabitha blinked at him, adopting a puzzled look. "Can you think of a more effective one?" she asked.

"She's right," Nolan Beetlebrick, one of Tabitha's fellow Slytherins, called from the crowd of students. "Debellows is a numpty. He's not teaching us anything useful. I want to learn how to fight for real."

There was a chorus of agreement.

"We hardly wish to usurp control of your club," Tabitha said, pocketing her wand. "We are here to learn, as are the rest of you."

"But if someone doesn't teach the lot of you how to do a basic Cruciatus Curse," Philia interjected, "how do you expect to deal with those who won't give a second thought to using a Killing Curse on you?"

The crowd of students babbled excitedly. "That's right," someone said. "You have to be ready to fight fire with fire!"

"Are all of you Slytherins completely daft?" a voice declared. James looked and saw Joseph Torrance push to the front of the group. "That's the way your kind have always been, isn't it? Go straight for the dark magic. You lot are just a bunch of one-trick ponies."

There was another babbled response from the crowd. A few people moved away from Joseph, as if they believed Tabitha might curse him where he stood.

"If the one trick is powerful enough," Tabitha said, smiling her most charming smile, "it might just be all a pony needs."

"That's enough of this," James called as the crowd began to get agitated. He raised his hands, turning toward the assembled club members. "We started this club, Ralph and Rose and me, and it's supposed to just be for first- through fourth-years," he said, glaring back at Tabitha and Philia. "Debellows is teaching magical defence to the older years, like those two. This club was meant to be a place where we could practice the basics of defensive magic. It was never the plan to learn any Unforgivable

Curses."

"Why not?" Beetlebrick interrupted, his face stony. "Why is everyone trying to make sure we don't know how to defend ourselves?"

A chorus of agreements and arguments erupted from the crowd. James called for order, but the noise of the babble was too loud. The group seemed about to dissolve into complete chaos.

A loud crack echoed through the room, surprising everyone present. James looked up, trying to see where the crack had come from. A dissolving trail of smoke led down toward the main door where Scorpius stood, his eyes narrowed and a small smile curling his lip.

"You want to practice Unforgivable Curses, do you?" he drawled. "In case you've forgotten, I am the teacher for this club. You Slytherins are new, so I'll let it slide, but you surely wouldn't want anyone to get the impression that you were trying to take over."

Tabitha's charming smile turned decidedly sharklike as she looked at Scorpius. "So it's true, first-year Scorpius Malfoy is going to teach us everything he knows. Does that include how to be a traitor to one's family values and traditions?"

Scorpius sighed and walked into the room. "Not until next term," he answered breezily. "Although when it comes to underhanded tricks and backstabbing, I'd hate to repeat anything you lot already know. Maybe you can test out of that section."

Scorpius threaded to the center of the group, moving between Tabitha and Albus, who stared at the pale boy with unmasked disdain.

"Excuse me," Scorpius said, bumping Albus with his shoulder. He turned to face the group, pulling his wand from his cloak with a flourish. "You wish to learn the most powerful curses, do you? You wish to know how to defend yourselves, and even more, to take the fight to the enemy, is that it? Well, contrary to what you may believe, I won't stop you. We will learn such things. And I will be the one to teach them to you." Scorpius narrowed his eyes again, staring hard at James, as if daring him to argue. "I may only be a first-year, but my family tradition, as 'Tabby' has already mentioned, is rich in the deadly arts. I'll teach you just as I was taught by my father and grandfather."

"You little prat," Philia hissed. "We've been practicing defensive magic for years! What can a greasy turncoat Gryffindor like you teach us?"

"The first thing I can teach you is to shut up when the teacher is speaking," Scorpius said, turning to Philia, his face unflinching. "Outside this room, you may be a fifth-year and I may be a 'greasy turncoat Gryffindor', but in this room, you are the student and I am your instructor. Or perhaps you're having second thoughts about joining this club?"

Philia's face had gone beet red with anger. "I'll teach you to speak to me that way, you—"

"Do stop, Philia," Tabitha interrupted, amused. "Scorpius is right. This is their club. We must abide by his rules. While we are in this room. Let us see what he can teach us, since he has apparently been so well-educated."

Scorpius glared at Philia, daring her to defy Tabitha. After a moment, Philia's face hardened. She pocketed her wand and folded her arms.

"Just as I thought," Scorpius said, turning to face the gathered club members again. "First things first. You must learn to defend, parry, and Stun before you can learn to make good use of anything more powerful. Skip the basics and you will be target practice for any git with a wand. Fortunately, we are well on our way with those skills, and I can only hope that our new Slytherin friends can keep up with us. But later, once you have mastered those techniques, you will be ready… to learn this."

Scorpius spun on his heel and flung out his arm, aiming his wand at the broken clockwork dummy. "Avada Kedavra!" he roared, baring his teeth. The bolt that shot from his wand was so bright and so green that it lit the entire room. It struck the dummy in the chest, and its arms and legs flailed full length, trembling violently. Then, with a clank and a rattle, the dummy fell off its frame. It clumped to the floor in a heap.

Scorpius stared at it, his eyes slit and his teeth still bared.

Nolan Beetlebrick stepped out of the perimeter of the crowd and kicked at the dummy with his foot. A cog tumbled out of it and rolled across the floor. "Well," the boy said, nodding, "you definitely killed it."

There was a round of nervous, scattered applause. Rose looked over at James, her eyes wide and worried. Her expression seemed to ask what have we done?. James simply shook his head slowly.

"This could be better than I thought," Albus said, nudging James. "Way to go, big brother."

As they left the gym a while later, James caught up to Ralph. "What happened to you? Where were you back there?" he demanded.

Ralph glanced at James defensively. "What? I was there the whole time!"

"You didn't say a word when Tabitha and Goyle showed up and started killing the target dummies!"

"Well," Ralph replied, shrugging and walking quickly, "it looked to me like you and Rose had it under control."

"Under control? You call completely losing our grip on the club 'under control'? Scorpius is planning to teach Unforgivable Curses!"

Ralph didn't say anything as he walked. James stared at him angrily, his eyes narrowed. "You want to learn them too, don't you?" he demanded.

Ralph pressed his lips together, refusing to reply. James turned in front of him, stopping him in the hall, but Ralph spoke first.

"Don't, James," he said, dropping his eyes and shaking his head. "Look, you're my best mate in the whole school, but we come from two different worlds. You Gryffindors can be all sweet and courageous about things like the Unforgivable Curses, but frankly, yeah, it does make sense to me to learn them. I'm sorry."

James' mouth dropped open. "Ralph, there's a reason they're called 'unforgivable'. We can't even use them to fight the Gatekeeper if it comes to that! That thing isn't even human! So there's no excuse for learning them."

"Isn't there?" Ralph said. James knew Ralph hated confrontations, but the bigger boy forced himself to look James in the eye. "Are you telling me you wouldn't have used an Unforgivable Curse to stop Voldemort from killing your grandparents?"

James backed up a step, speechless. He started to reply, but Ralph went on, cutting him off. "What about when my uncle was getting ready to murder Ted Lupin's dad? Would you have used an Unforgivable Curse to stop him from doing that? Or even my own grandparents when they were driving my dad to a Muggle orphanage, telling him they didn't want him anymore, that no Squib was good enough to be their son? What if someone had been there to Imperio them, and force them to take him back home, and make them love him the way parents are supposed to love their kids? Are you telling me you'd have decided not to do it because only 'bad' people use Unforgivable Curses?"

James stammered, shocked at the quiet ferocity in Ralph's eyes. "Ralph, I… no. I mean…"

Ralph shook his head and looked away. "I can't blame you for not understanding that, James. But honestly, if using an Unforgivable Curse could bring back the people you'd thought were lost forever, wouldn't you do it? If it could return the things that were taken from you by people who were stupid and selfish and mean… wouldn't you?" Ralph looked at James again, his eyes bright. "Because I'd do it, James. I really would. Without a second thought."

With that, Ralph pushed past James and walked into the dimness of the corridor. James knew there was no point in following him, but he was frightened by the things Ralph had said. He'd never seen such passion in the big boy before, but apparently, it had been there all along, just under the surface.

Rose caught up to James, shaking her head worriedly. "We'll have to corner Scorpius in the common room," she said. "He's still back there surrounded by everybody. He's showing them how to do the *Levicorpus jinx*. What's the matter?"

James shook his head, still looking after Ralph. "I don't know, Rose. None of this is going the way it's supposed to. And to tell you the truth, I don't have any idea what I'm supposed to do about it."

"I'll tell you what you need to do about it, James," Rose said seriously.

James glanced at her, furrowing his brow. "And what would that be?"

"Same thing you did last year when you ran into trouble," Rose replied, arching her eyebrows. "Go ask for help from somebody who does know what to do."

By the beginning of next week, James had still not spoken to Scorpius about his speech at the last Defence Club. It wasn't that he hadn't had the opportunity; it was more that he simply didn't know what to say. James knew Scorpius only well enough to know that if he demanded Scorpius not teach Unforgivable Curses to the club, Scorpius would probably begin the next meeting with them. He considered simply removing Scorpius as teacher for the club, but the fact of the matter was that Scorpius *was* a fairly good teacher, and he did seem to know an awful lot.

The worst part was that James was unable to discuss the problem with Ralph since Ralph apparently wanted to learn the curses. James could sort of understand the things Ralph had said, but all the reasons Ralph had listed for learning the curses were already in the past. Learning the curses now wouldn't bring back James' grandparents or Ted's dad. Perhaps Ralph thought there were more such tragedies to come and he wanted to be prepared for them. Either way, it was worrying. Ralph had been moody and quiet ever since the conversation in the hall, and James decided it was best just to leave him alone for a while.

Fortunately, James was completely distracted from all these things for a short while during Tuesday's Care of Magical Creatures class. Hagrid led the students around to the back of the barn, shushing them and keeping them behind him with one enormous hand.

"Grawp's getting rather good at this," Hagrid whispered, "but we don't want to distract 'im. It's ticklish work, walkin' a dragon."

As the group crept around the edge of the barn, James peered past Ralph, struggling to see. In the near distance, just at the edge of the Forest, Grawp was walking very slowly, looking back over his shoulder. He seemed to have something like an iron door strapped to his left forearm like a shield. A very thick chain led from Grawp's upraised right hand, ending at a collar on Norberta's long neck. Amazingly, the dragon was ambling docilely behind Grawp, sniffing at the trees and occasionally rooting her snout into the ground, snapping at something.

"Norberta likes a nice fat mole, she does," Hagrid whispered. "And she can smell 'em right through the earth. She'd be great pest control if she didn't occasionally set the trees afire. Today's nice an' wet though, so I knew it'd be safe to give 'er a walkie."

"What happens if she flames on Grawp?" Morgan Patonia asked. "Is that what that iron door is for?"

Hagrid shook his head. "She loves Grawp even more'n me. She'd never flame 'im. The shield is just an extra safety measure. Last year, Headmistress McGonagall insisted he always wear it when he took Norberta out. S'just habit now."

Grawp tugged at the chain lead as Norberta hung back, sniffing at a tree trunk. Ponderously, she leaned against the tree and rubbed on it, as if scratching an itch. The tree shuddered and groaned, leaning noticeably.

"I wonder who'd win in a fight," Graham whispered, grinning, "the Whomping Willow or Norberta?"

"That's stupid," Ashley replied, shaking her head.

"I'd pay to see it," Graham said. "Battle of the Magical Titans. Just imagine it."

Ashley rolled her eyes. "I am imagining it, and it's stupid."

"Don't let her knock that tree over, Grawpy," Hagrid called as quietly as he could, cupping his hands to his mouth. "That's a Grimlock Elm. Not many of 'em left!"

Grawp tugged harder on the chain lead, but Norberta was stubborn. She rapped her tail on the hillside in annoyance, producing a perceptible shudder in the earth. She seemed to be sniffing at something just inside the perimeter of the trees. She clawed at the ground, pulling Grawp and pushing the trees apart with her massive shoulders. She snorted a small burst of yellow flame.

"What's she after?" Hagrid asked worriedly. "Er, maybe yeh lot should head back around the barn again. Just for safety's sake."

None of the students obeyed. Instead, they pushed forward, curious to see what was happening, although none ventured in front of Hagrid himself.

"Easy, Grawpy!" Hagrid called in a strangely small voice. "Not too hard! Give her just a little slack. We don't want to make her mad now. What the—"

Something small and yellow had suddenly flown out of the trees, as if frightened by Norberta's rooting. It fluttered between her legs and arced up, streaking into the grey sky.

"Oh no," Hagrid said in a worried voice. "I wondered where she'd got to."

With a violent, serpentine lunge, Norberta spun, her entire body trailing behind her head and her open, snapping jaws. Grawp was yanked entirely off his feet, refusing to let go of the chain. He landed with an enormous, muddy thump and slid along the wet grass, pulled by Norberta's wild thrashing.

"Everybody inside!" Hagrid yelled, shooting out both arms protectively. "It's a Wargle I got from

Viktor Krum, and Norberta's just daft about it. It got loose a few days ago, but I figured it'd be halfway back to Bulgaria by now. Grawp! Hold 'er down! Don' let go, no matter what!"

The ground shuddered as Norberta thundered after the yellow creature, pulling Grawp along behind her. Great muddy streaks tore up the hillside in their wake. None of the students had budged. James stared at the spectacle, wide-eyed, unsure if it was amusing or frightening. The Wargle was about the size of a cat but canary yellow and with four fluttering wings. A long, tufted tail trailed behind it, whipping the air. James thought the creature looked almost impossibly cute. Norberta thrashed and leapt, snapping her jaws wildly, barely missing the fluttering, swooping shape. Thumping along behind, Grawp was heroically pulling himself up the chain, trying to reach Norberta's neck.

"That's it, Grawpy," Hagrid cheered, beginning to trot uncertainly out onto the hilltop. "I'll grab 'er tail if I can. You get 'er by the neck! Oh!"

The Wargle suddenly angled upwards, streaking into the sky beyond Norberta's reach. With a massive flourish, the dragon unfurled her wings and brought them down with a single, thunderous thrust. She leapt off the ground, roaring and pulling Grawp with her.

"I thought she couldn't fly!" Graham exclaimed. The students began to shuffle nervously backwards, moving toward the relative shelter of the barn.

As if sensing a hiding place, the Wargle arced downwards again, angling toward the crowd of students. Norberta thrashed her wings and lunged. She was amazingly fast for her size despite her injured wing. Students scattered in all directions as her shadow darkened the sky overhead. Hagrid ran back and forth, arms outstretched, as if he meant to catch the enormous dragon.

"Hold on, Grawp!" he called to his half-brother, who swung gamely from the chain lead, leaving a trail of mud gobbets. "You've got 'er! Don' let go!"

Norberta roared again, struggling to stay airborne. Her tail thrashed as she flapped, striking the chimney of the barn and obliterating it to flying bits of stone. The Wargle circled in a panic. Finally, the yellow creature seemed to sense that Norberta couldn't properly fly. It swooped upwards, aiming for the distant clouds.

"Grawp!" Hagrid called suddenly. "Shield! She's going to flame!"

Norberta gave one last thrust of her massive wings, stretched out her long neck, and roared. This time, the roar produced a long stream of blue-white flame. Heat blasted out over the hilltop. James felt it ripple through his hair. And then, with a reverberating thump, the dragon landed on all four claws. Grawp came down right next to her. He was covered in mud and bits of grass, but he instantly leapt up and threw his arms around the great dragon's neck, holding her down. The dragon didn't seem prepared to attempt flight again. She raised her head full length, jaws wide open. A moment later, a small black shape tumbled out of the sky, trailing smoke. It fell straight into Norberta's gullet and she swallowed audibly.

Hagrid shook his head. "Shame 'bout that," he said. "Wargles is hard to come by. I warned 'er, I did. Ah well, so long as nobody's hurt. Grawpy, are yeh all right, then?"

Grawp tentatively let go of the dragon's neck, and stepped away, still holding the chain lead. He glanced back at Hagrid. "Grawp got mud in nose," he said ponderously.

"Sorry 'bout that, Grawpy. Let's go ahead and put the old girl back in 'er pen, eh?" He turned back to the students, his face red and imploring. "It's prob'ly best if we, er, kep' that between ourselves, if yeh don' mind."

James glanced aside at Trenton, who had earlier threatened to write his parents about Hagrid's rather frightening menagerie.

"That," Trenton said, noticing James' look, "was totally bloody awesome."

As James and Ralph were heading back from the barn, they passed the greenhouses where Professor Longbottom's first-year Herbology class was just letting out. James spied Scorpius.

"I'll see you at lunch, Ralph," James called as he trotted away. "Places to go, people to see."

Ralph didn't reply, and James knew why. The bigger boy knew what James was up to. Scorpius heard James coming and stopped, turning back.

"I wondered when I'd be hearing from you, Potter," he said, staring up at the low clouds.

"Yeah, well, I wanted to talk to you about Defence Club."

"Of course," Scorpius smiled thinly. "Come to talk me out of teaching the hardcore spells, did you?"

"Actually, no," James replied. "I've been thinking about it. I can't stop you from showing people what you learned from your family, and besides, if people don't learn those things from you, they'll learn them from Corsica and Goyle. I came to you because…"

James couldn't quite bring himself to say it. He knew Rose's advice had been right, but he just hadn't known when or where he was supposed to use it. Now he did. Finally, he took a deep breath and said through gritted teeth, "I came to ask for your help."

"My help?" Scorpius replied suspiciously. "With what?"

"With getting Tabitha and the rest under control," James answered. "Look, you know it even better than me. They don't want to learn jinxes and hexes and curses to fight the bad guys. They just want to use them to be bullies and get power over people. The Defence Club was supposed to be a way for people to learn basic fighting spells and techniques, but I think it can be even more than that. I think we can use it to practice the things Professor Debellows is teaching us about how to be real fighters. We can practice the Artis Decerto techniques he's showing us and get really good at them. Then we

can put those skills together with the spells we've already learned, and later, when everyone is ready to know how to use them…," James gulped, "you can teach the Unforgiveable Curses, if you still want to."

"Let's see if I understand this," Scorpius said. "You started the Defence Club because you didn't like the fact that Debellows wasn't teaching any defensive magic. And now you want to turn the club into a place to practice the silly stuff that he is teaching us?"

James sighed. "Yeah, all right, you make it sound totally stupid. But that's pretty much the truth of it. Either way, if Corsica and Goyle and even Albus keep coming to the club and killing the target dummies, they're just going to push for the Unforgivable Curses and bypass everything else. Maybe some people can handle knowing the Unforgivable Curses, but not everybody can. And definitely not without learning the basics first."

"So kick them out," Scorpius shrugged. "You run the club. You decide who's in it. It isn't my problem."

"I can't just kick them out," James said, exasperated. "Anybody who wants to come to the club can. But you know how to talk to them! It was totally brilliant the way you handled them last club meeting. Your family understands the way Slytherins think! I need you to help keep them from taking over."

Scorpius narrowed his eyes. "Just because my father convinced me to help get you through the Mirror of Erised, doesn't mean I'm your mate, Potter. I teach your club because I want to, not because you asked. Who are you to decide who gets to know the Unforgivable Curses or not?"

James stared at Scorpius thoughtfully. "I don't think you even believe that yourself," he said. "You're just trying to make me mad at you, and I don't even know why. If you thought everyone who wished should be able to learn the Killing Curse, you'd have taught it last class, or let Corsica and Goyle do it. Instead, you spent your time distracting everybody with stuff like the Levicorpus jinx. Admit it or not, you agree with me, Scorpius."

"You're delusional, Potter," Scorpius said, turning on his heel. "Why would I agree with you?"

"Because," James called, watching the pale boy walk away, "you're also a Gryffindor. And I think the Sorting Hat knew what it was doing."

Scorpius didn't stop. He simply continued to walk away, heading toward the castle. James watched for a moment, then sighed and followed. He could only hope that despite Scorpius' attitude, he'd at least think about what James had asked.

Eventually, Albus told James how it had happened.

Thursday evening came and Tabitha, Philia, and Albus were on their way to the gym for Defence Club. While they were still several corridors away, Scorpius met them coming from the other direction.

"Just turn around and walk with me," he said in a low voice, trying to put his arms around both Tabitha and Albus.

"Remove your hand or pick it up wherever it lands," Tabitha said, pointing her wand at Scorpius' wrist.

"Touchy, touchy," Scorpius replied, pulling his hands away. "And here I am trying to help you."

Albus scoffed. "As if we needed your help, you prat."

"Believe it or not, I am indeed saving you a bit of bother," Scorpius growled, looking Albus in the eye. "Your brother's little club is about to be disbanded, and I don't expect it will go well for those who are in attendance when it happens."

Philia's face was etched with suspicion. "What do you mean?"

"Some concerned individual has alerted Professor Debellows that students are being taught defensive magic and curses, all in an effort to undermine his teaching technique. They also allowed it to slip that some students have even been seen practicing the Killing Curse."

Tabitha studied Scorpius' face. "How perfectly devious. But tell me, why would you do such a thing?"

"Did I say it was me?" Scorpius asked innocently.

"He's lying," Albus said. "He wouldn't do that to his housemates."

"You might want to step aside a moment," Scorpius said, glancing down the corridor. Voices were approaching quickly. Debellows stalked around the corner, herding Rose ahead of him. She looked extremely worried.

"So you and James Potter are responsible for this, eh?" Debellows said gruffly. "He's the son of the Ministry's Head Auror, is he not? I should have known he'd be trouble. I understood that there were

three of you, though."

"Well," Rose quavered, "there are, in a manner of speaking. I guess there's no point in hiding it anymore. You'll see for yourself soon enough."

As Debellows and Rose passed Scorpius, she gave him a wilting look. Scorpius grinned crookedly.

As they swept on, Albus glared angrily at Scorpius. "Why would you do that to my brother?"

"Is this how you repay me for my warning? I guess blood is indeed thicker than water, isn't it?"

"Why, Scorpius?" Tabitha asked. "You're only making things harder for yourself with your housemates."

"My housemates are a bunch of arrogant sissies," Scorpius growled. "They don't have the spine to learn real magic. It became obvious to me last week that you lot are the ones I need to partner with. Yes, yes," he said, raising his hand as Philia opened her mouth, "I'm a Gryffindor. What do names mean? If names meant everything, little Albus would have to duel to the death with both of you. Slytherins and Potters have always been mortal enemies, haven't they? Obviously, we're past that, and for good reason. I'm not asking to be a member of your silly Fang and Talons club. I am merely suggesting that perhaps we start a new club, and perhaps it meet in the Slytherin casting range, where we can feel free to practice whatever we wish in secrecy."

"And you'd deign to teach us?" Philia demanded, smiling grimly.

"I think not," Scorpius answered. "The fact is I'd not be able to attend regularly. Besides, I imagine it as more a group practice session. We can all learn from one another, and no one will be there to tell us what we shouldn't know. I *would,* however, require access to the Slytherin quarters. It seems like small payment for today's favor. Besides, as you implied last week, Tabitha, my family does have a rather long Slytherin history."

"You little rat," Philia said. "All this just because you hate that you've been made a Gryffindor."

"Having a ring key does not make you a member of Slytherin House," Tabitha said, tilting her head and smiling. "No Gryffindor can be allowed free access to our quarters. However… I suspect we can come to an agreeable arrangement."

"That's all I ask," Scorpius answered brightly. "And now I should be running along. It will look rather suspicious if I am not there when the hammer falls on James' little club. We'll chat soon."

Tabitha, Philia, and Albus watched Scorpius turn and trot off in the direction that Debellows had led Rose.

A few minutes later, Scorpius passed the closed doorway of the gymnasium. He could see through the pebbled glass window that it was dark inside. He stopped and listened. A moment later, he heard

voices further down the corridor, echoing. He followed the sounds, turning left at the next passage. It opened onto a high hall with windows on one side. James and Rose stood with Debellows in the center of the marble floor. They were all staring straight up, craning their necks. Debellows had his wand upraised, aiming it carefully. Overhead, Ralph hung by his ankle, suspended high in midair.

"We were just trying it out," James explained. "It's called the Levicorpus jinx. I didn't know it'd take a counter-jinx to get him back down again."

"Hold on, Ralph!" Rose cried, wringing her hands in a parody of worry.

Debellows shook his head disgustedly. "This is exactly the reason I do not teach defensive magic to younger years," he snapped. "No concept whatsoever of the consequences. It's a good thing you didn't accidentally learn the Bat-Bogey Hex. That was a favorite in my day. Liberacorpus!" Debellows flicked his wand and Ralph spun upright. A moment later, he drifted clumsily to the floor.

"Whoa," Ralph said shakily. "Dizzy."

"I apologize, Professor Debellows," Scorpius called from the doorway. "It's my fault. I learned that jinx from my grandfather. I should've known better than to show anyone how to do it. I've certainly learned my lesson."

"I should hope so," Debellows said gruffly. "If I was a less gracious man, I'd subtract points from whatever your houses are, but I'll take your word for it that it'll never happen again." He pocketed his wand and turned to Rose. "You interrupted a perfectly good pipe, I'll have you know, young lady. But never mind. Are there any other magical mishaps I might address before I return to my quarters?"

All four students shook their heads enthusiastically.

"Thank you, Professor," Rose said breathlessly. "It really is a pleasure to see someone of your stature at work."

"Well," Debellows replied, smoothing his robes, "of course, I understand. Good evening, students. And like I said, don't call me 'Professor'. The name's Kendrick."

"Kendrick," Rose said, as if enthralled with the very syllables. "Thank you, sir. Goodnight."

When Debellows finally left, Scorpius came alongside Rose, James, and Ralph. "I think I'm going to be sick," he said.

"I'll say," Ralph agreed. "You were supposed to act appreciative, Rose. Not like you worshipped the ground under his feet."

"It was nothing," Rose replied as if she'd been complimented. "I mastered that technique years ago with my father."

James grinned. "You're a little scary, Rose. Come on! Let's get to the gym. Scorpius, how'd it go with Tabitha, Philia, and Albus?"

"As well as planned," Scorpius said, shrugging. "They believed my story the moment they saw Debellows march past. They won't be back."

James reached the door to the gym first. He yanked it open and stepped inside, lighting his wand. In the darkness, the club members sat in groups, whispering excitedly. They looked up as the four entered.

"All right," James said, holding his wand over his head. "Hi, everybody. Like I said a few minutes ago, we have an announcement today. After last week, there was a lot of talk about learning the three Unforgivable Curses. Scorpius is the teacher, so what we learn is up to him. But before we get to anything really scary powerful, we're going to get better at what we *do* know, and spend some time practicing the techniques Professor Debellows has been showing us in D.A.D.A."

"Why in the world would we do that?" Nolan Beetlebrick said, standing up. "I thought the whole point of this club was to learn the stuff he wasn't teaching us."

Scorpius answered, "The point of this club is to learn defensive techniques and become the best at them as we can. Some of you just want to learn a few quick incantations and curses? Be my guest. But if you think you'll be able to duel half as well as the rest of us after we've mastered the kind of skills Debellows showed us the other day, I think you'll end up very disappointed."

Ralph surprised James by speaking up. "I know it isn't very exciting to practice all the drills and exercises Debellows has showed us. That's why we're going to keep working on the spells and magic too. But James is right. We have to learn it all together. It's the only way we'll really be the best we can be. But maybe some of you aren't happy with that. If so, remember it's just a club, not a class. You can go anytime you want."

Nolan Beetlebrick was still on his feet. He saw that everyone was looking at him. He shuffled his feet a little. "So who's going to be teaching us this *Artis Decerto* stuff? Him?" he exclaimed, pointing at Scorpius. "I doubt his grandfather taught him any of that."

"No," James said, glancing at Scorpius. "We have another teacher for that. He didn't learn it himself, but he'll be working alongside someone who knows it very well. Together, they'll be leading that part of the club from now on."

"Yeah?" Beetlebrick said, putting his hands on his hips. "And who's that?"

"Me," a voice answered. Beetlebrick jumped and took a step backwards as two ghosts flitted through the wall next to him. "And her."

James smiled as Cedric moved into the center of the room, emanating his own soft light in the dark space. Next to him, the Grey Lady floated gently.

Beetlebrick sat down on the floor again, staring in awe at Cedric and the tall, pale woman.

Rose cleared her throat. "Maybe it'd be helpful if you explained a little background, Cedric."

Cedric glanced back at Rose and nodded. "Of course," he said to the assembled club members. "I'm Cedric Diggory, and I guess you all know who she is. This is the Grey Lady. She says she'd prefer that I not tell any of you her real name. But the point is she knows Artis Decerto. Apparently, it was common for ladies to learn the defensive arts in her time, and… well, her mother thought it might be very helpful for her to be very well-trained."

The Grey Lady spoke in a thin, faraway voice. "I was tutored under the very best teacher of martial magic in the world. He confided that I was one of his most gifted pupils."

Most of those in the room had seen the Grey Lady flitting morosely around the halls, but few had ever heard her voice. Graham Warton raised his hand tentatively. "Who was it that taught you Artis Decerto, Miss?"

The Lady looked at him and tilted her head slightly. "My father. He invented the art."

"Look," Beetlebrick said, "I don't mean any disrespect, but I have to ask. If you were all that great at dodging spells and curses like Debellows did the other day, then how did you end up getting killed so young?"

The Grey Lady seemed unperturbed by Beetlebrick's question. She opened her ghostly shawl, revealing the front of her dress. An ugly knife wound stained the dress, still as red as the day it had been inflicted. "As you can see," she answered, "it wasn't a spell that killed me."

James leaned toward Rose. "You've got your wish, Rose," he whispered. "We've got a woman teaching us Artis Decerto after all."

"I'm really enjoying the new stuff we're learning in Defence Club, James," Cameron Creevey said as he followed James down the stairs late Saturday morning. "Whoever would have thought that the Grey Lady had a seventh-degree mastery of martial magic! She always seemed so calm and feeble, didn't she? And with Cedric Diggory's ghost helping her teach, I mean, wow! Who would have thought it!"

"Yeah, Cameron," James said, walking as fast as he could. "I'm glad you like the club."

They passed a group of older students by the main doors, all of whom were dressed in jeans and jumpers or jackets, babbling excitedly. Professor McGonagall stood at the head of the queue,

accepting and inspecting the small parchments each student handed her.

"Yes, yes, Mr. Metzker, no point in making a show of it," she said as Noah flourished his permission slip. "Off you go. And if I catch you with any more of those awful Peruvian ballistic beans, it'll be more than deducted House points, I can assure you. Who's next?"

"Pity you can't come, James," Damien called as James pushed past the queue, heading out into the courtyard. "Hogsmeade weekends being only for third-years and older, you know." He waggled his eyebrows and grinned. Sabrina elbowed him in the stomach.

"I wish *I* could go to Hogsmeade," Cameron said wistfully, staring after the departing students. "Still, I'm sure there's a very good reason younger years can't go."

"Yeah," James said, stopping at the courtyard gate and turning to the younger boy. "Well, anyway, Cameron, I'm sure you have other things to do today. Don't let me keep you."

Cameron shook his head happily. "No, actually, I don't have a thing to do. I was sort of hoping that—"

"James!" Rose called, panting as she ran across the courtyard to meet him. "Ralph's coming. He insisted on borrowing a Sneakoscope from Trenton Bloch, the blighter. That warning from Zane's sure got him on high alert, especially today, since… er. Hi, Cameron."

"Hi, Rose," Cameron grinned cheerfully. "What's going on?"

Rose glanced at James, frowning a little. "Oh. What? Nothing. You know. Saturday this-and- that. Same as usual. Boring, really."

"What's your friend Ralph need a Sneakoscope for?"

James put his arm around Cameron, trying to steer him back toward the front entrance. "You know, Cameron, today would be a great day to practice up on some drills and exercises. The gym's open all day. I bet you could even find some other club members to join you."

"Well, why don't you three join me?" Cameron said, ducking under James' arm. "Since you don't have any plans yourselves."

Rose cleared her throat. "It isn't that we don't have any plans exactly, Cameron. They're just, er…"

"Secret," James interjected, at exactly the same moment that Rose said, "Boring."

"Secret, er, boring plans," James went on, nodding. "Club stuff. Scheduling and counting members and… and…"

"And planning field trips!" Rose added, brightening.

"We're going to go on a Defence Club field trip?" Cameron asked, furrowing his brow.

"Sure," James replied. "It's a secret, so keep it to yourself. But we're going to go to, er…"

"Er," Rose chimed, "the Forbidden Forest, with Hagrid, to practice Artis Decerto against some…"

"Some centaurs!" James supplied. He nodded. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

Cameron looked vaguely puzzled. "Centaurs know Artis Decerto?"

"Sure," Rose said confidently. "They practically invented it. I mean, they didn't *really* invent it, obviously, but practically… Anyway, it's a big secret, so don't tell anyone about it yet, all right?"

"Hey, everybody," Ralph said as he approached, shouldering his satchel. "We're all ready to go—"

"To Hagrid's," James interrupted, nodding at Ralph fervently. "To talk about the field trip. Yeah, I suppose he'll be expecting us any minute. So, anyway, see you around, Cameron."

Cameron looked at James, Rose, and Ralph in succession, his eyes slightly narrowed, then he smiled cheerfully. "Yeah! Sure. I'll keep it a secret. I've never seen a centaur in person. That'll be excellent!"

"Centaurs?" Ralph said, turning to James. "You never said anything about—"

"Cool!" James interrupted. "Yeah, thanks, Cam. Hush-hush, right? See you later."

Cameron nodded and backed away. Finally, he turned and headed back toward the castle entrance.

"What in the world was all that about?" Ralph asked as the three students ran around the corner of the gate.

"James' secret admirer," Rose said. "We had to come up with something fast so he wouldn't tail us around all day."

"Do you think you can remember the secret knot?" James asked, changing the subject.

Rose answered, "Gennifer marked it with a spot of green paint. It looks like moss unless you get up close. Should be pretty easy to find if you know what to look for."

As they crested the hill and came in sight of the Whomping Willow, James found a long stick beneath a birch. He smiled, showing it to Ralph and Rose. Rose nodded seriously.

"You're on secret knot duty, then, James," she said. "Just give it a good poke. We'll follow you into the entrance between the roots once the Willow goes still."

James gripped the stick and approached the tree. The Willow seemed to sense his intent. It reared slightly, creaking its roots, and whipping its thinnest branches threateningly.

"Stay low," Ralph called. "You'll need to get just inside the shadow of the tree to reach the knot. The

big branches can't reach you, but those little green ones might if you're too high."

James hunkered as low as he could until he was crawling forward on his hands and knees. The tree swished and groaned over him. A whip-like green branch swung at him, trying to wrench the stick out of his hand. It missed, but James felt the breeze of its passage.

"Careful," Rose cried in a thin voice. "Just right there! Slowly!"

James reached as far as he could, staring down the length of the stick at its wavering tip. He could see the spot of green paint applied earlier in the term by Gennifer Tellus. This close up, he could see that she'd painted it in the shape of a tiny smiley face. The Whomping Willow creaked ponderously and James felt its shadow leaning over him. He lunged and poked with the stick, striking the knot dead-on.

"That's it!" Rose cried. James heard both Ralph and Rose running forward. He scrambled up, slipping on the wet grass. Clumsily, he hurled himself forward into the dark crack between the Willow's massive roots. He landed with a thud in the mossy hollow beneath the tree. A moment later, he heard and felt the entrance of Ralph and Rose. They landed on either side of him, barely missing him in the damp darkness. James laughed in relief. He began to climb to his feet when a fourth shape hurtled through the entrance, bowling directly into James. A knee bounced off his chest, knocking the wind out of him. There was a chorus of angry and surprised shouts.

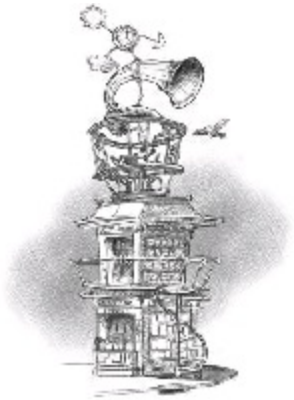
"What the—" Ralph cried, scrambling up and snatching after the intruder. He caught the figure by the collar just as Rose whipped out her wand.

"Lumos!" she cried, holding it up.

The wandlight sprayed over the skinny shape of Cameron Creevey, held suspended by Ralph's grip. The boy had dirt and bits of bark on his face. He grinned gamely.

"Hi, guys," he said, panting. "Some field trip, eh?"

15. Out of Hogsmeade



"I couldn't help it," Cameron said as the four traipsed along the length of the tunnel. "I just knew you were up to something exciting! I saw you heading out toward the Whomping Willow and I remembered reading that there had been a secret passage there, back in our parents' day. They say it was all sealed off after the battle, but still, I knew you three could find a way through if you wanted. So I followed along. I was about to call out to you, but then the tree stopped moving and you all ran toward it! I did the first thing that came to mind and ran after you. It was a near thing too! The Willow came back alive just as I got under it! It swiped at me and barely missed!"

"Stupid, lazy tree," Ralph muttered.

"Cameron, that was a very reckless thing to do," Rose said reprovingly, still holding her wand aloft to light the way.

"Well, you can't blame me, can you?" Cameron protested shrilly. "I've read all the Harry Potter stories at least a dozen times! When I saw you sneaking off, I *knew* you were going on some big secret adventure! I just wanted to see it in person. I promise I won't get in the way!"

"Those stories are all rubbish, Cameron," James grumbled, not really believing it. "My dad says that he couldn't even read them all the way through. They make it all seem like an exciting romp, but it was mostly really scary and people dying and buckets of dumb luck."

"Oh, I know," Cameron enthused. "Believe me, I understand all that. I know Revalvier's books are cleaned up a little bit. I mean, they were written to be children's stories. But still, my dad says they got the main parts all right. And your dad really did fight Voldemort and defeat him, all because of the protection his mum gave him when she died to save him. That part wasn't made-up, was it?"

"Look, Cam," James began a little angrily, but Rose cleared her throat and nudged him.

"We weren't the only ones to lose relatives in the fight against Voldemort," she said softly.

James remembered. Cameron's Uncle Colin had been killed during the Battle of Hogwarts. James sighed. "All right, Cameron, I guess you've a right to come along today as any of us. But trust me, there aren't going to be any grand adventures."

"There better not be," Ralph said darkly.

"I told you, Ralph," Rose said, "the tunnel to Hogsmeade is technically a part of Hogwarts. It's under the protection Merlin gave the castle. We're safe here."

Ralph didn't seem particularly relieved. "Yeah, well, what about when we get to Hogsmeade? Are you going to tell me that somehow the whole village is 'technically a part of Hogwarts'?"

"Arguably, it could be," she answered. "It's probably the last vestige of the fief that once surrounded the castle. But either way, there will be loads of people there. Not even… er, someone really powerful would attack us with all those crowds around. Besides, no one has seen the Headmaster for almost two weeks, have they?"

"I saw him just yesterday," Cameron piped up. "He was in the hall outside the common room, just walking along like he was on a stroll."

James glanced back at Cameron. "You saw Merlin in the castle? Are you sure it was him? I thought he was off travelling somewhere. That's what Professor Longbottom said."

"I guess he got back, didn't he?" Cameron replied. "What? I thought you all *liked* Headmaster Merlin."

"Sure, Cam," Rose said. "We like him well enough. We just, er, wouldn't want to get caught sneaking off the grounds like this."

Cameron grinned. "Oh, you three won't get caught. That wouldn't make a very good story, would it?"

James was becoming rather annoyed with Cameron. "This isn't a 'story', you know. Merlin knows when things are going on around the school. If he's here…"

"Let's not spook ourselves," Rose said soothingly. "We're not doing anything terrible. We just want to get a look around Hogsmeade, that's all. Nothing bad is going to happen. Cameron's probably right. It wouldn't make a very good story if we were all captured and horribly dispatched by some waiting enemy in the Shrieking Shack…," her voice trailed off uncomfortably. "Er… would it?"

"Depends on what kind of story it is," Ralph said gloomily.

They walked in nervous silence for awhile. Eventually, the tunnel began to slope upwards. It ended at a jumble of broken crates and bits of furniture, all covered with dust and cobwebs. Beyond was only thick darkness.

"We must be at the Shack," Rose said in a whisper. "James, can we make it through?"

"Just barely, if we move some of this rubbish around." James gingerly began to stack some of the fallen crates. Dust puffed up at his efforts, clouding Rose's wandlight. Spiders skittered on the walls.

"So we're at the Shrieking Shack, then?" Ralph asked in a quavering voice. "Should we be expecting

it to, you know, start shrieking?"

Rose answered, "It doesn't do that, Ralph. It's a long story, but there's nothing to be afraid of here. At least, not anymore."

Ralph gulped. "Then why are you whispering?"

"There," James said, wiping his brow with his sleeve. "I can see through. It's really dark, but if you duck right here we can get into the next room."

James led the way, clambering through the small opening on his hands and knees. He could see that the tunnel entrance had once been larger, but the Shrieking Shack had deteriorated quite a lot in the years since the tunnel had been used. Much of the wall had crumbled around the opening and the ceiling overhead had partially collapsed.

"Whoa," Cameron said in awe as the four students dusted themselves off. "This is where it all happened! This is where Harry Potter learned the truth about Sirius Black! I bet it was right over there that Black almost killed the rat, Peter Pettigrew!"

"Thanks for the play-by-play, Cam," James muttered. "Come on, let's get out—"

Cameron gasped, causing everyone to jump. "It must have been right here that Voldemort ordered his snake Nagini to attack Professor Snape!" Cameron said breathlessly. "He probably died right where you're standing, Ralph!"

"Can you, like, stop talking about who killed who in this very room, Cameron?" Ralph exclaimed. "It's not like the place needs any more ambiance."

"Oh," Cameron said sheepishly. "Yeah. Er, sorry."

Slowly, the four made their way upstairs, stepping carefully through a strew of broken furniture and collapsed ceilings and walls. The deterioration of the Shrieking Shack was severe enough that James worried the place might simply collapse on top of them. Wind whistled and moaned through cracks in the walls, making the entire house creak. As they reached the main floor, broken windows let in enough daylight that Rose could finally extinguish her wand.

"There's the door," Cameron said, pointing. Remarkably, the old door was still intact and fit snugly enough in its warped frame that the four of them had to pull the handle simultaneously to budge it open.

"I sure am glad to be out of there," Ralph said, jumping off the sagging porch. "I think the only thing holding that place up is force of habit."

James glanced back at the Shack. "Let's just hope it holds up for at least a few more hours."

"It occurs to me," Ralph said, looking at James and Rose, "that this is an awful lot to go through just to get some Drooble's Best Blowing gum and say hi to Ted."

Rose shook her head and trotted along the path leading toward the village. "Oh, come on, Ralph. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"I think I used it all up last year."

James smiled. "The worst part's behind us, Ralphinator. Come on, it'll be fun!"

"Hurry up, you guys," Cameron called, halfway between Rose and the two boys. "I have to use the toilet!"

Ralph rolled his eyes, and then grinned at James. "Come on, I'll race you!"

James, Ralph, Rose, and Cameron found their way to the High Street and wandered along it, happily enamoured by the various shops and bustling crowds. James and Ralph were debating whether to visit Honeydukes or Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes first when Rose exclaimed in delight, pointing.

"Scrivenshaft's?" James said as Rose hurried forward. "You want to go to the quill shop first?"

"I know I won't be able to afford much of anything," Rose replied, pushing through the door and jingling the bell, "but I can't wait to see what the new Heddelbum self-inking dodo tips are like. Oh, look! They have an actual working Recalls-It-All pen! It remembers everything you write and can duplicate it perfectly!"

"Now that would be handy," James said, his eyes widening. "A pen that can take your tests for you. How much?"

Rose glanced at James disdainfully. "It's really amazing how hard you'll work to avoid the simplest schoolwork, James."

"Yeah," James answered, "Uncle Ron would be proud."

The four of them worked their way along the street, stopping in at most of the shops along the way. Cameron bought a new wand holder at Hiram and Blattwott's Leathers and immediately sheathed his wand in it. He showed it to James and Ralph.

"Protects the finish while simultaneously enhancing magical properties!" Cameron proclaimed

proudly, reading directly from the tag. "The inside is lined with suede and enriched with Wymnot's Wand Polish and Enchant-Enhancer. It cleans and empowers my wand every time I put it away!"

"That's great, Cam," Ralph nodded. "Er, looks really dashing too."

"Thanks!" Cameron grinned. "Hey, can we stop at the newsstand? I want to see if the new issue of *Stupendous Stories* is available."

The newsstand stood on the corner of the High Street and Guddymutter Avenue, and it was the only two-story newsstand James had ever seen. A spiral staircase on the side led to a narrow wrought-iron walkway that encircled the second level. The walkway was packed with wizards and witches browsing every type of newspaper and magazine imaginable. The very peak of the newsstand was a noisy miniature Owlery, twittering with birds of all sizes. They seemed to be coming and going at every moment, each owl attended to by a small man installed at a round desk in the center. As each owl arrived, the little man spun on his chair to retrieve its parcel. Most of these seemed to be small strips of parchment rolled like scrolls and inserted into brass tubes on the owls' legs. As the man removed the message, he'd turn to a speaking tube and read its contents. The speaking tube carried the man's voice through a complicated curlicue of expanding pipes and bellows, eventually broadcasting his every word out over the High Street.

"Breaking news from Turkey," the man read in a surprisingly deep, baritone voice, "the Grand Vizier of the Wizarding Caliphate, Rajah Hassajah, has died unexpectedly, to be replaced in interim by his assistant, Ahmed al-Mustaphus. International wizarding bank authority to freeze all transactions with the Caliphate until said crisis is satisfactorily managed. Updates as events warrant."

"Oh, look who's on the cover of this month's Quibbler," Rose cried delightedly, pulling a copy off a shelf on the lower level. James leaned over Rose's shoulder, studying the tabloid in her hands. '*Daughter of Quibbler Founder to Wed*', read the cover headline alongside a photo of Luna Lovegood happily accepting a ring from her new beau, Rolf Scamander. The picture was obviously staged, but Luna's smile was genuine enough, and the look of happy affection on Rolf's rather bug-like face was unmistakable. In the photo, Luna took the ring, and then held it out to the camera. It seemed to be made of amber with an insect embedded in it.

"That's been done," Ralph sniffed.

"Well, I'm happy for her," Rose said, replacing the tabloid on the rack. "Luna's hoped to get married for a long time. She wants a family."

"How do you know that?" James asked, furrowing his brow. "I've known Luna all my life and she's never said anything about that."

Rose looked aloof. "That's because you haven't been listening in on the right conversations."

Overhead, the Owlery announcer spoke through his amplifying apparatus, "In an update to previous reports, the mysterious sightings of swarms of Dementors throughout Central London have only

increased, although no amount of investigation has been able to pinpoint the hive's origin or predict the locations of any future oppressions. Further, the range of the infestation appears to be increasing daily, reaching into neighboring vicinities at an alarming rate. Muggle reportage of the incidents is gaining precedent, although attributions of the effects are extremely varied. In a breaking development, the Ministry of Magic has announced the creation of an Auror sub-department to locate and subdue the hive. Meanwhile, many concerned citizens of the magical world are departing the Central London area until the unexplained oppressions are brought under control. Continuing updates as events warrant."

Ralph's face had gone pale. "I heard something about those Dementor swarms when I first went home for the holiday, but I didn't think anything of it. It seems to have gotten a lot worse now. Do you think this is connected to the descent of the Gatekeeper?"

"It must be," James said, remembering his earlier conversation with the Headmaster. "Merlin told me that the Borleys were basically baby Dementors. Maybe the Gatekeeper is something like the *ultimate* Dementor. Maybe the Gatekeeper has assembled all the uncaptured Dementors and is using them to begin its work on the earth!"

Rose shuddered. "That's an awful thought! If it's true, James, then our parents might be in danger, since they work at the Ministry. Especially your dad. If he's in charge of that Auror sub-department, he'll be chasing the Gatekeeper and he won't even know it! We have to warn them!"

James knew Rose was right. He nodded. "I'll send Dad an owl as soon as we get back tonight. I'll tell him everything we know so far."

"But why would the Gatekeeper be using Dementors?" Ralph asked. "I thought it could affect humans directly?"

Rose answered, "It can, but only a few at a time, for now. It feeds on fear and terror, so it's using the Dementors to get what it needs. But this proves that it hasn't found its human host yet. Once it possesses the host, it won't need the Dementors anymore. It'll become directly connected to the community of mankind. It'll be able to affect loads of people all at once, and nothing will be able to stop it."

"We need to get both halves of the Beacon Stone before that happens," James said fervently. "Whoever has the whole stone can still send the Gatekeeper back into the Void, right?"

"We don't even know where Slytherin's half of the stone is," Ralph lamented. "And the half that we do know about is on the finger of the most powerful wizard in the world. This makes stealing Jackson's briefcase last year look like a walk in the park."

James was unperturbed. "At least we know where Merlin's Beacon ring is. We just need to find out who might have inherited Slytherin's Beacon ring."

"Well, no problem there," Ralph said sarcastically. "We just need to trace some mystical black ring

through three dozen generations of dark wizards. That should be a breeze!"

"What mystical black ring?" Cameron asked, returning with a newsstand sack.

Rose rolled her eyes. "Nothing, Cameron. We're just trying to save the world here. We do this every day, you know."

"Oh," Cameron said, frowning a little. "I just thought maybe you were talking about the Gaunt family ring Headmaster Dumbledore gave your dad."

As one, James, Ralph, and Rose looked at Cameron. He blinked at them a little nervously.

"What ring, Cameron?" Ralph asked.

Cameron smiled crookedly, as if he was being teased. "You know. The ring with the Resurrection Stone in it. It was one of the Deathly Hallows in the last book. Headmaster Dumbledore captured it and gave it to Harry Potter inside the Golden Snitch. You remember that, er… don't you?"

Rose, Ralph, and James exchanged looks. Rose said, "Could it really be that simple?"

James' eyes widened thoughtfully. "Cameron, you know those books pretty much frontwards and backwards, right? Tell us everything you remember about that ring."

Cameron looked at James, a little puzzled, and then shrugged. "Well, according to legend, the ring once belonged to Death, so it allowed the holder to see and speak to dead people. It was passed on through generations of Salazar Slytherin's relatives until it came to the Gaunt family. Voldemort took the ring and used it as a, er, Horcrux," Cameron whispered the last word as if it was a sort of swear word. He went on in his normal voice. "Later, Dumbledore captured the ring and cracked the stone with Gryffindor's sword, making it useless to Voldemort. After Dumbledore died, he willed the stone to Harry Potter, hiding it inside his Snitch. In the book, Harry uses the Resurrection Stone to speak to his dead parents when he's going to confront Voldemort in the Forest. After that, no one knows what became of the stone. Anyway, when you said something about a mysterious black ring, I just thought that might be what you were talking about. My mistake."

"Cameron," Rose said seriously, "I could kiss you, you silly geek. That's brilliant!"

Cameron blushed fiercely and hugged his newsstand sack, grinning.

Ralph asked, "Do you really think the Resurrection Stone and the Beacon Stone are the same thing?"

"It sure seems to fit," James replied. "It was black and set into a ring and it was passed on by Salazar Slytherin through loads of generations."

Rose added, "And it allowed the bearer to see and communicate with dead people because it came from the Void that all departed souls pass through."

Ralph shuddered. "So whatever became of it? What happened to it after that night in the Forest?"

"It's just like Cameron said," Rose sighed, "no one knows. If I remember right, it was purposely left out of the books so that nobody would be tempted to search for the stone again. It was presumed lost forever. Nobody knows where it is, or even if it still exists."

James narrowed his eyes, thinking. He decided not to say anything, but he knew of at least one person who did know what had become of the Resurrection Stone. And James was one of the only people on earth who could ask that person and possibly get an answer.

Eventually, the foursome made their way to the Three Broomsticks, affectionately known among some of the older students as the 'Triple Sticks'. They ordered Butterbeers and had a light dinner. Hogwarts students packed the tables, talking boisterously and calling to each other. Sabrina, Damien, and Gennifer Tellus jostled through the door just as James was finishing his sausage. Damien grinned as they pushed their way through the throng.

"Made it through the tunnel, I see," Damien called. "I'm a little jealous, you know. We discovered that passageway first. I was hoping to be the first to see the inside of the Shrieking Shack. How was it?"

"Barely standing," James answered. "You'll be lucky if it's still upright when you go through yourself."

"Where's Noah and Petra?" Rose asked.

Gennifer rolled her eyes. "Oh, they're having a lover's spat over at Madam Puddifoot's. I told them it'd be nothing but trouble if they started dating."

"They aren't really dating," Sabrina said, pulling up a chair and sitting down. "They're just snogging. It isn't exactly the same thing."

James glanced up sharply, surprised that he had somehow missed this development. "How long have they been, er, snogging?"

"It started about a week before Christmas," Sabrina replied. "It's probably all that rehearsing as lovers for the play that did it. You can only pretend to fancy one another for so long before it leaks over into real life."

"James knows all about that," Ralph said, popping the last of his sausage into his mouth. James sighed.

"So what are they fighting about?" Rose asked.

Damien gestured dramatically. "Noah saw Petra having some big, heavy conversation with Ted behind Weasleys'. She was crying, and Ted didn't look too happy either. Noah's quite the jealous type, you know."

"He should've known what he was getting into, dating his best friend's former girl," Gennifer proclaimed loftily. "It spells trouble any way you look at it."

Sabrina said, "I just don't understand what Ted sees in Victoire anyway. He was lucky to have Petra. Victoire's a bit of a stuck-up powder puff no matter how you look at her. No offense."

Rose waved a hand. "Oh, you don't have to apologize to us. We think the same thing most of the time."

James felt suddenly hot and angry. He stared out of the window, confused at his own thoughts and emotions. Something about the fact that Noah and Petra were suddenly dating needled him mercilessly. He'd always liked Noah quite a lot, but now, all of a sudden, he wanted to go find the older boy and push him down. The irony of it was that he knew where to find Noah: he was sitting across from Petra at this very moment, just down the street in the ridiculously pink and fluffy Madam Puddifoot's Tea Shop. Worse, James now knew for certain that Noah wasn't the main problem. Just as Rose had said, Petra was obviously still in love with Ted Lupin, despite the fact that he had moved on to Victoire. The whole affair was hopelessly complicated, and James was frustrated to realize that there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

Eventually, the conversation moved on to other topics. James, Rose, Ralph, and Cameron said goodbye to the Gremlins and made their way out to the street. The evening was cooling as the sun lowered, bringing a restless wind through the village. Bits of newspaper and candy wrappers skirled across the street as students began making the journey back to the distant castle. The foursome began to make their way to the Shrieking Shack, stopping only once along the way to pop into Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes where they hoped to say hello to George and Ted.

"The old tunnel is open, eh?" George said, grinning over the front counter. "That's excellent. Fred and I only tried that route once, since everyone was afraid of the ghosts in the Shack. We didn't make it all the way through, but we got far enough to leave some graffiti on the walls, as I recall."

Rose nodded. "Yeah, I think I saw that. The drawing of Professor Snape was particularly amusing."

"Oh, those were Fred's," George said, sighing. "He was a good one for a quick caricature. He said it was all in the hook nose."

James asked, "So how's business been?"

"Oh, really excellent. Ever since we bought out Zonko's, we've been rolling. They had a pretty loyal clientele, you know. I've even considered making this Weasleys' flagship location instead of the shop at Diagon Alley, but Ron says I shouldn't. He says the original location is still the best."

Rose looked around appreciatively. "I bet Ted loves working here. This place is right up his alley."

"Yeah," George agreed. "It's good having him around. He's a hard worker and he has some great ideas for some new products. Some of those new Every Flavor Beans were his ideas, although even I drew the line at a flavor called 'guanomole'. The blighter's been no use to me today, though. These

Hogsmeade weekends are like a family reunion for him. He's been in and out all day doing who-knows-what."

There was a loud snap. James and Rose turned to see Cameron shaking his finger violently, trying to dislodge something that had apparently clamped onto the end of it.

"You snapped it, you bought it, my friend," George said jovially as he came out from behind the counter. "Just kidding, really. Those are the finger snapping Galleons. Always a laugh, those. Just lay one on the ground and wait for any unsuspecting person to come across it."

"They sure look real," Cameron admitted as George pried the fake coin off his finger. "Up until the point that it chomps on you, I mean. That's, er, great. Thanks."

"If you like those, you'll love our Disapparating knickers bomb," George said, leading Cameron to another shelf. "Now with an expanded effectiveness range of three meters! Great for parties."

As James browsed around, he peeked through the backroom curtain and saw Ted sitting on a pile of crates. Lately, he had taken to using his Metamorphmagus skills to change the appearance of his hair again, just as he had when he'd been a baby. He had made it quite long today. It hung in dark curtains, partially obscuring his face. James thought he looked a bit like the long-departed Sirius Black.

"Hey, Ted," James said. "How's everything?"

Ted looked up, although James still couldn't see his face. "Oh. Hi, James. It's all right."

"How's practicing for the National Quidditch Team coming?"

"Hmm?" Ted said. "Oh yeah. It's all right, I guess. I've been really busy here at the shop, but other than that, yeah, it's fine."

"Ted," James said, slipping past the curtain, "er, what's going on?"

Ted's voice was strangely flat. "What do you mean?"

"I mean with Petra. I know it's none of my business, but…"

"What do you know about it?" Ted asked, a little sharply. "I know Metzker's all in a tizzy about it, and the rest of the Gremlins are probably talking it up, but I didn't think you'd be in on it too."

"In on what?" James asked, stopping just inside the backroom curtain. "Look, I—"

"Whatever everyone is saying, it's all rubbish, James. You lot just need to leave Petra alone, especially Metzker. And you can tell him I said so."

"Ted," James began, but he didn't quite know what else to say. Ted stirred, climbing to his feet.

"I see you've got Dolohov with you. You're still chumming around with him, eh?"

James looked hard at Ted. "You mean Ralph? Er, yeah. I guess. Why?"

"Oh, no reason, really. After all, it wasn't his people that killed your parents."

James shook his head. "Ted, you… you can't blame Ralph for that. He wasn't even born then. His father was just a kid when the battle happened."

Ted sighed wearily. "Don't tell me who I can and can't blame, James. Look, I'm sorry I brought it up. I'm not in a very good mood tonight. Maybe you and Rose and your friends should get back to the tunnel. It's getting dark."

James nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He turned to go, and then looked back. "See you later, Ted."

Ted waved. "See you around, James. Be careful."

By the time the quartet came out of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, the sun had dipped below the horizon, leaving a fierce orange and purple sky behind it. Quickly, they made their way back toward the Shrieking Shack. The protective fence around the property had long since fallen into disrepair. James led the way through the same break in the fence they had used earlier in the day. At the top of the hill, the ramshackle Shack stood in black shadow, looming ominously.

"I was really hoping to get through this part before it got dark," Ralph said fervently. "I can't even see the front door."

"It's right there," Rose said, lighting her wand and pointing it. "Just like we left… it…"

Rose's voice trailed away as her wandlight played over the front of the Shack. In spite of her words, the door didn't, in fact, look exactly as they'd left it.

"I thought we pulled the door closed again," Cameron said curiously. "Didn't we pull the—"

"Yes, Cam," James interrupted. "We sure didn't leave it like that."

The front door had been shoved open so far that the top hinge had broken. It leaned awkwardly inside its frame. Beyond the entry was impenetrable darkness.

"Does that look like someone was going in, or coming out?" Ralph asked, trying to keep his voice even.

"What does that matter?" James asked.

"Well, for one thing, it tells us if we were followed or if we're walking into a trap," Ralph answered reasonably.

Cameron asked, "Who'd try to trap us?"

"Nobody," Rose replied firmly. "Come on. It's probably just an animal or something. Let's just get this over with."

She climbed onto the sagging porch and shone her wandlight into the dark doorway. James clambered up next to her, his heart pounding. Together they walked through the doorway with Ralph and Cameron following close behind. The interior of the Shack had obviously been disturbed. Some of the old furniture had been shoved aside, leaving scrapes on the dusty floor. Worse, the stairway leading to the cellar looked all wrong. The doorway was splintered and bowed, and the stairs beyond seemed unusually steep.

"Wait," James said, grabbing Rose's arm. "This isn't right. Look down there."

All four students hunkered and peered down the rickety staircase. By the glow of Rose's wand they could clearly see that the room below was virtually gone. Broken hunks of wall and sections of collapsed ceiling choked the stairs, completely blocking them.

"How could that have happened just today?" Ralph asked breathlessly. "I mean, it held up for twenty years and then decided to come crashing down right after we came through?"

"Maybe we dislodged it somehow," Cameron reasoned.

James shook his head. "No, someone did this on purpose. Someone knows we're here and is forcing us to go home by another route."

Cameron looked at James, smiling quizzically. "Why would anyone do that?"

"Because they want to keep us out of the tunnel," Ralph answered in a small voice. "Because the tunnel is part of Hogwarts."

"Come on," Rose said quickly. "If we hurry, we can catch up with some of the other returning students."

Cameron looked alarmed. "But we'll get caught when we go back," he exclaimed. "Professor McGonagall will see us coming back with the older students! We'll get in trouble!"

"Let's seriously hope that's the worst that happens, Cameron," Ralph said, following Rose back out of the decimated front door.

As quickly as they could, the four retraced their steps back along the High Street. As they walked, James could occasionally see the spires and turrets of Hogwarts castle, looking teasingly close against the darkening sky. A cross street at the end of town seemed to angle in the right direction. James led the troop down it, toward a stand of intervening forest.

"This doesn't look right, James," Ralph worried. "Isn't there a path that leads straight through to the castle?"

James answered, "Yeah, we have to be getting near it. Watch between the cottages."

"I wonder where everyone else is at," Cameron commented, looking around at the narrow, deserted street. A dog barked nearby, and something squeaked in the cooling wind. "Shouldn't there be other students heading back along this route?"

"Hogsmeade weekend officially ends at dusk," Rose said quietly. "They were already heading back by the time we stopped in to see George."

"What was that?" Ralph suddenly asked, spinning on his heels to look behind him.

"What?" James whispered, his hair prickling.

Ralph's eyes darted over the street. "I… I thought I heard something behind us."

Rose shook her head. "Get hold of yourselves, you two. It was probably just a dog or something."

"I heard it too," Cameron said. "It came from over by that alley."

"Come on," Rose said firmly, pulling the bigger boys by the sleeves. "You're spooking me out, and I was spooked enough already. Let's go!"

A few minutes later, the side street turned a sharp corner in the wrong direction. James peeked between the cramped cottages, looking for some sign of the castle.

"There's a little footpath," he said. "It winds back through some trees."

"Is it the path to the school?" Ralph asked.

"I don't know. But it's going in the right direction. Let's give it a go."

James led the troop between the cottages, past a tiny fenced garden, and into the darkness of a stand of trees. The trail wound between bushes and tall grass.

"Boy, this is just getting worse and worse," Ralph said quietly. "I thought the whole point was for us to never be alone?"

"We're not alone," James said as he plodded further along the path. "We have Cameron with us."

"And whatever was following us back there," Cameron added cheerfully.

"Cameron!" Rose said warningly.

James was growing increasingly worried. The path was winding deeper into a stretch of forest that separated Hogsmeade from the grounds of Hogwarts. The trees blocked the light of the dusky sky, reducing the path to a dim patchwork of shadows. Occasionally, James thought he heard the sound of footsteps along the path behind them or further ahead of them, but he determined not to call attention to them. He pulled out his wand and illuminated it, holding it up as high as he could. The wandlight starkly lit the nearby trees but only made the deeper depths seem all the darker by comparison. No one spoke for several minutes as they walked. Finally, thankfully, the path turned toward a thinner patch of trees. Through them, James could see the indigo of the evening sky and the pale yellow face of the full moon.

"Look," Rose said, pointing, "just beyond the edge of the trees, I think that's the main gate! I can see the silhouette of the two boars!"

James squinted. He didn't have his glasses with him, so he couldn't quite make out the distant shapes in the darkness.

"Yeah," Ralph said, "I see it. Wow, that's a sight. Come on!"

As the four students trotted forward, the trees parted overhead, revealing the night sky and a scattering of stars. The moon shone its pale yellow light all round. Sure enough, the ancient wall and the open gates stood nearby; the two famous stone boars arched their backs at the sky, baring their tusks. James breathed a great sigh of relief. In a few moments, they would be safely within the grounds of Hogwarts again.

"Heh," Cameron laughed nervously. "See? I told you there would be a great adventure! Wait until my dad hears about—"

Cameron's voice cut off as a noise of running feet approached swiftly. The boy turned to look back, his face curious. Something large and dark loomed out of the darkness, flying low over the ground.

Rose screamed, lunging backwards and reaching for her wand. Ralph and James ducked as the figure hurtled over them. It landed on the path between James and the gate, skidding on the dirt and turning back to face them. A low, ferocious growl came from it and it began to advance.

"Stupefy!" Rose called, pointing her wand, but it was too dark to aim properly. The red bolt struck the ground in front of the creature, lighting it for an instant. James saw teeth bared along a narrow snout and bright, terrible eyes.

"It's a wolf!" he called, scrambling backwards. The wolf responded to his voice with a loud snarl. It lowered, coiling close to the ground, and then pounced. James covered his face, shielding himself from the teeth and claws, but instead of being mauled by the beast, he was knocked roughly aside by

it. Then, directly behind him, there came the noise of a violent struggle and a scream of pain. It was Ralph. James scrambled to his feet, reaching for his wand. With a gasp, he realized he'd dropped it when the beast had attacked.

"Stun it, Rose!" James called.

"I can't!" Rose cried, pointing her wand wildly. "I can't tell them apart! If I Stun Ralph, it'll kill him!"

The wolf rolled with Ralph as he wrestled it. It seemed to have his wrist locked in its jaws. It shook its head violently, tearing at Ralph's arm. Ralph screamed again, trying to kick the enormous beast off of him.

Without thinking, James lunged at the creature. He threw his arms around the matted fur of its neck, pulling as hard as he could. Suddenly, intensely, James' phantom scar burned. He squinted against it, willing himself not to let go of the wolf's neck. The beast scrambled and thrashed, still not releasing its grip on Ralph's arm. James could feel the muscles pulsing beneath the wolf's fur, could smell the dank smell of its pelt. Suddenly, it got a paw on James' chest. It dug in its claws and swiped, tearing ragged strips in James' sweatshirt. He felt something hot and sticky immediately soak into his shirt, but there was no pain. Instead, the pain in his forehead throbbed and pulsed, distracting him. The wolf thrashed again, knocking James loose. He scrambled after it, but it was too fast. The paw swiped, barely missing James' face.

Suddenly, there was another voice calling out. "No, Ted! Stop! This isn't the way! Let him go!"

James rolled and got to his knees. He looked around wildly, squinting past the throb in his forehead, and saw a tall figure lunging onto the wolf. James was too stunned to immediately recognize who it was. The newcomer pulled at the wolf's ears, forcing it to release its grip on Ralph. The beast flailed its head back and forth, snapping.

"Stop this, Ted!" the newcomer cried, and James finally recognized it was Petra. "You don't know what you're doing! This isn't the way to fix things! Not here, not now!"

The wolf lunged mightily, hurling Petra off, but it didn't renew its attack on Ralph. The beast snarled at him, and then leapt away, snapping and slavering its bloody jaws. It seemed confused, almost as if it were at war with itself. Finally, it threw back its head and howled, long and loud. It chilled James' blood because he could sense the humanity in that howl, almost as if Ted's voice was buried under it, crying out in anguish and despair.

Petra climbed to her feet and slowly approached the great wolf. Remarkably, she knelt next to it and stroked its fur. She spoke to it quietly, soothingly.

"Ralph!" Rose rasped, dropping next to the big boy. "Are you all right? How badly are you hurt?"

Ralph moaned and rolled over, struggling to his knees. James scrambled over to him.

"I think my arm's broken," Ralph said with remarkable blandness. "It feels all loose and hot."

James could see the mangled mess of Ralph's wrist. Blood soaked through his shredded sleeve. "Ralph," James exclaimed, "you look awful!"

"You look pretty horrible, too," Ralph said. "Are all your guts still inside?"

"I think so, er, I hope," James replied, looking down at his bloody chest.

"Let me look at your wrist, Ralph," Petra suddenly said, kneeling next to him. Ralph held it up. Petra gingerly peeled back the torn fabric of Ralph's sleeve, revealing his forearm.

"Artemisae," she said, touching her wand to the cuts and punctures. "That'll stop the bleeding until we can get you to Madam Curio."

"What are you doing here, Petra?" James asked as she turned to examine his chest.

"I was walking back by myself," she answered. "I was just coming up the path when I saw what was happening."

Rose was trembling visibly. "But… how did you know that the wolf was… was…"

"It's a full moon, Rose. And Ted and I… we talked a lot. He told me about his… condition."

Petra performed the same technique on James' scratches, which, she assured him, looked a lot worse than they were. Finally, Rose and Petra helped James and Ralph to their feet.

"Where'd the wolf go?" Ralph asked, shaking. "Is it gone?"

Petra nodded, looking back toward the forest. "He's gone."

Rose gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. "What about Cameron?" she said through her fingers.

A cursory search found Cameron lying on his face in the grass, the bag from the newsstand covering his head. He had a very large, muddy paw-print on his back but was otherwise completely unhurt.

"What happened?" he asked woozily as they dragged him upright. "I think I fainted. Did I really faint? I missed the whole thing!"

James sighed, finally feeling some pain in his chest as the wounds stiffened. "We'll tell you all about it later, Cam. Let's just get back to the castle."

Limping and bloody, the group of five made their way through the gate, heading toward the welcome glow of the castle windows. After a minute, James trotted back, holding one hand over his chest. He looked around for a few moments, cursing under his breath. Finally, he found his wand in a tuft of

grass. He tucked it into his jeans pocket and ran back, yelling for the rest to wait up.

In the dark distance, somewhere between the gate and the village of Hogsmeade, a wolf howled a long, sorrowful note.

16. Unexpected Confrontations

Just as Cameron had feared, Professor McGonagall was awaiting the returning students. She sat in a portable chair with a cup of tea and her tartan shawl, a long parchment across her lap. Petra climbed the portico steps first. McGonagall looked up as Petra came into the light.

"You're rather late, Miss Morganstern. Yours is the last name on my list. Perhaps you'd—" the professor's voice cut off as she saw the others climbing slowly up the steps. Her eyes widened, immediately taking in James' bloody shirt and Ralph's mangled wrist. She leapt up, spilling her tea.

"Mr. Potter, Mr. Deedle, what in the world is the meaning…," she began, and then stopped herself. "Miss Morganstern, please collect Madam Curio from the Great Hall and ask her to meet us immediately in the hospital wing."

"It was a—" Ralph began, holding his wrist in front of him.

"Some sort of wild animal," Petra interrupted. "It came out of the woods while we were on our way back. It's all my fault, Professor. It probably smelled the half corned beef sandwich I was carrying home from Madam Puddifoot's. I should've known better."

"We'll determine who should've known what later, Miss Morganstern," McGonagall huffed, herding the troop toward the hospital wing. "For now, please hurry! Madam Curio!"

Madam Curio met them shortly after their arrival. She clucked her tongue as she gave James' chest a cursory look, and then turned to Ralph.

"Miss Morganstern, you did a very satisfactory job halting the bleeding on these boys," she proclaimed in a businesslike manner. "Would you be so kind as to assist me? By the time my nurses arrive, we'll probably be finished. Hand me that bottle of Arthroset and that box of Dermamend bandages, please. And perhaps you'd be so kind as to clean Mr. Potter's wounds?"

Petra scrubbed her hands and filled a basin. James hissed through his teeth as she began to gently sponge off his scratches.

"You mustn't tell anyone about Ted," Petra whispered as she worked. "The world isn't a very

forgiving place for werewolves, even half-werewolves like Ted."

"I know," James answered quietly. "He told me about it last year. But he wasn't transforming then. He was just getting really restless and hungry around full moons."

Petra nodded. "He still doesn't transform very much. He's only got half the blood of a werewolf. If he'd been a full werewolf, I'd never have been able to talk him out of attacking Ralph. He only looks fully lycanthrope because he's also a Metamorphmagus, like his mother."

"You mean he purposely transforms himself to look like a wolf?"

Petra shook her head, but more out of confusion than denial. "It's very complicated. I don't think he really means to. Usually, he can control it, but when a full moon comes, part of Ted really *wants* to change into a wolf even though his father's blood isn't enough to force the physical change. Since he's his mother's son though, he can transform himself. And the more upset he is, the harder it is for him to keep it under control."

James sighed, and it hurt his chest. He was about to ask why Ted had only attacked Ralph, but he knew the answer already. Ted had made it very clear when James had talked to him earlier in the day. Ralph was a Dolohov, even if he hadn't formally taken the name, and it was a Dolohov who'd taken Ted's parents away from him. Quietly, James asked, "Do you think it was Ted that destroyed the tunnel entrance in the Shrieking Shack?"

Petra shrugged slightly. "It might have been. He… he had reasons to be upset today. I'm afraid I reminded him of his loss, although it wasn't what I meant to do. I just needed to talk to him."

James studied Petra's face, but he could tell that she wasn't going to say any more. Truthfully, James didn't want to talk about it any further. His forehead still throbbed worryingly, and what he wanted to do most of all was simply rest.

Madam Curio insisted that James and Ralph spend the night in the hospital wing, sleeping on the wonderfully charmed beds. Neither boy minded, since it meant breakfast in bed the next morning. It also postponed the inevitable meeting with the Headmaster, whereupon they would have to explain their unsanctioned misadventure. James' chest had been bandaged rather densely, but he could tell that the werewolf's slashes were already healing swiftly. They itched as the skin knitted together. Living in the wizarding world was a remarkable thing, he thought. Nevertheless, despite all their magic and potions, he reminded himself that Grandfather Weasley had still died of a stupid heart attack. James would have gladly dealt with weeks of slow, painful healing if the alchemists who'd invented Dermamend Skin-Knitting Bandages had spent their time instead working on a magical cure for heart attacks.

"What are we going to tell Merlin?" Ralph whispered to James the next morning as they ate their breakfasts in bed.

James shook his head nervously. "The truth, I suppose. Except for the part about Ted. Like Petra said,

as far as anyone else is concerned, we were attacked by some wild animal. That's all."

Ralph shuddered. "I thought he was going to rip me to bits."

"It sure looked like he wanted to," James admitted. "Ralph, Ted wasn't in his right mind. He was all wolfed out, half because of his dad's werewolf blood and half because of his mum's Metamorphmagus blood. I mean, like Petra said, he was still Ted inside, but without any of Ted's self-restraint. He wasn't really trying to kill you. He was trying to avenge his parents. You're just the closest thing he has to somebody to blame."

"I know," Ralph answered sadly. "Really, I don't blame him. But still, does this mean I'm going to turn werewolf too?"

"No," James replied. "Ted isn't werewolf enough to fully transform without using his Metamorphmagus abilities. He definitely isn't werewolf enough to spawn any more werewolves. You got off lucky."

Ralph nodded thoughtfully. "Still, I think it'll be pretty awkward next time I see him. How do you get along with someone after they nearly ripped your arm off with their teeth?"

"Deal with that when the time comes, Ralph. We've got enough to manage at the moment."

Late that morning, Madam Curio pronounced James and Ralph fit to go back to their dorms, although they'd have to return the next day to have their bandages removed. No sooner had they left the hospital wing than they met Rose.

"We've been summoned to the Headmaster's office," she said, her face very pale. "Right now. Come on."

Silently, the three made their way through the castle, finally approaching the gargoyle that guarded the spiral staircase.

"Password," the gargoyle said, as if bored.

"Er, they just changed it," Rose said to James and Ralph. "Professor Heretofore told me the new one when she told me we were summoned. Let me think. Oh yes… Caerth Hwynwerth."

"Blimey," Ralph said as the three climbed onto the rising staircase. "I'd never remember that."

Rose nodded gravely. "I guess that's the point."

"Maybe it won't even be Merlin," James whispered hopefully. "He's been travelling all the time lately. Professor McGonagall's been filling in for him."

Rose just looked at James, a little hopelessly. She rapped on the huge wooden door leading into the Headmaster's office.

"Enter," a deep, rumbling voice answered. James and Ralph both gulped simultaneously. The door swung ponderously open, creaking slightly. James tensed, waiting for his phantom scar to burn, but it didn't, or at least not much. He resisted the urge to touch it. Merlin was seated at his massive desk. In front of him, sitting in the only chair, James was surprised to see Damien Damascus. Damien looked chastened and meek, but James couldn't be sure whether the look was sincere or an act.

"Mr. Damascus and I have been discussing yesterday's unscheduled departure," Merlin said, leaning back in his chair and lacing his fingers together. "He has been so kind as to come to me of his own accord, claiming some degree of responsibility for your actions. Is it possible that you three will corroborate his tale?"

"Er…," James began, looking from Merlin to Damien. "Er… yes?"

Merlin nodded slowly. "Do go on, then. Tell me your version of the story, Mr. Potter."

Merlin's eyes bored into James, and yet James couldn't recognize any specific malice in that gaze. James cleared his throat, glancing at Ralph and Rose for support. Rose nodded at him, eyes wide. James said, "Well, we just wanted to see Hogsmeade, sir. We knew we weren't of age to go on Hogsmeade weekends, but we didn't think… I mean…"

"You didn't think that the rules applied to you," Merlin nodded. "That is the crux of your story, is it not, Mr. Potter?"

James swallowed past a large lump in his throat. His face heated. "I… I guess so, sir."

"Tell me," Merlin said, sitting forward again in his chair, "how did you manage to find your way to the village unseen?"

James glanced at Damien again. Damien's face remained a mask of chaste repentance. Suddenly, James remembered what Damien's role in the Gremlins was; they had discussed it at the very beginning of term. Damien was the official Gremlins scapegoat. Up until now, James had not quite known what that meant. "Er… Damien showed us a way?" James said, still looking at Damien and frowning nervously. "He found the secret passage… er, right?"

Merlin sighed. "Yes, that is the way Mr. Damascus tells it."

Damien nodded miserably. "I teased them, sir. I told them they didn't have the guts to sneak into the village next Hogsmeade weekend. I simply wasn't thinking. I should've known they'd get caught. I should've known they'd get attacked by a wild, ferocious beast on the way back, all because of an innocent half corned beef sandwich! I am just sick with guilt!" Damien crumpled, burying his face in his hands and sobbing with woe.

Merlin simply stared at Damien, his piercing eyes mild, his brow raised slightly. After a long moment, he returned his gaze to James.

"Regardless of Mr. Damascus' purported challenges, the three of you should have known better. I am not inclined to go lightly on you. This sort of careless behavior cannot be tolerated in an institution that prides itself on order."

Merlin looked down at his desk again, ticking his quill over some notes. James glanced at Ralph and Rose. They would certainly get points deducted from their houses, and while that was bad enough, it wasn't the end of the world. Damien looked at James sideways, still managing to look stricken with guilt.

Without looking up, Merlin said, "Your punishment shall be the dissolution of your so-called Defence Club, effective immediately."

James boggled at Merlin, his mouth dropping open. Rose spoke first.

"You can't do that, sir!" she exclaimed. "That would be punishing all the members of the club as much as us!"

"As I recall, you convinced a first-year member of that club to accompany you in yesterday's debauchery," Merlin said, glancing up sharply.

"Cameron?" Ralph said. "He followed us! We tried to get rid of him!"

"In either case, this does not incline me to trust your leadership abilities for such a club."

James frowned angrily. "But it isn't fair to the rest of the club!"

"'Fair' is a strange concept which this age seems to prize above all else," Merlin said, sighing. "In the age that I come from, a 'fair' was a place where farm animals and servants were bought and sold. You may choose to remember what the word means to me before bringing it up again."

"But sir—" Rose began. Merlin silenced her with a raised hand.

"That is my final word," he said flatly. "You may go. That includes you, Mr. Damascus."

Rose turned away, and Ralph followed. Damien got up. He looked as if he wanted to say something to the Headmaster but then thought better of it. As he turned to leave, he gave James a warning look. Merlin watched James, his face inscrutable. Finally, James also turned around and walked toward the door.

"James," a mild voice said from the rows of old headmasters' paintings. James glanced up. The portrait of Severus Snape was empty, but the portrait of Albus Dumbledore had raised its head. Dumbledore looked at James through his half-moon spectacles, smiling a small, curious smile. "Wait just a moment, if you would. I believe the Headmaster wishes to speak to you alone."

The office door thunked as it closed, making James jump. He turned around and Merlin was right

behind him, towering over him.

"I've been meaning to have a little chat with you, my boy," the big man said, his voice low and dreadful. "Your friends may believe they know what is happening, but I suspect you agree that the main question exists between you… and me."

James didn't know what to say. He stared up at Merlin's impassive face, his heart suddenly hammering. Merlin went on.

"As you no doubt suspect, very little happens within these halls that I do not know about. You've been through the Amsera Certh, and I can only imagine that you've learned much about me and what has happened in this castle. Thus, you have me at a disadvantage, for while I have been to and fro throughout this new age, learning much and loving little, the one thing I cannot be sure of is your convictions and intent. You worry me, my boy, and that is no doubt. Not because I fear you, but because I fear what you might choose to believe. There is only one thing that keeps me from stopping you in your tracks this very instant. Would you like to know what it is?"

The question was rhetorical. James didn't bother to answer.

"It is this," Merlin rumbled, raising his hand and pointing directly at James' forehead. "Yes," he nodded, "I can see it. I know not from whence it comes, nor by what art it has been conjured. Perhaps it means you are my ally, strange as it may seem. But perhaps again, it marks you as my foe. It is that question and that question alone that stands between us, James Potter. That question, resting like a lever on the fulcrum of one very small stone. And do you know what that stone is?"

James didn't. He started to shake his head, but then he remembered something. Perhaps it came to him directly from the Headmaster's eyes, since it was a memory of another time he and Merlin had stood like this, talking in private. It had been in the cave of Merlin's cache, after the test of the golden cord.

"Trust," James said, his voice very dry. It sounded right. Merlin nodded slowly, meaningfully.

"I will be watching, James Potter. As you know, I have eyes *everywhere…"* He looked aside, indicating the empty portrait of Severus Snape. "Trust only lasts until the final evidence is revealed. I will be watching… for that evidence."

There was a soft click and the Headmaster's door creaked open. James glanced at it. He was dismissed, but he couldn't quite bring himself to go yet. He looked up at the Headmaster, steeling himself. "Is it true that you can't harm anyone inside these walls?"

Merlin smiled very thinly at James. He turned back toward his desk, gesturing toward the Amsera Certh, which sat in its frame, covered in the thick black cloth. "Ask Lord Hadyn," he said, crossing the room. Then, in a lower voice, he added, "Or Lady Judith."

The black cloth suddenly flew off the Mirror, revealing the swirling mercury smoke. The smoke began to clear as the pages in the Focusing Book suddenly riffled of their own accord, flipping past as

if in a hard wind.

"Run, James," the portrait of Dumbledore whispered harshly. "You do not wish to see this. Run!"

James turned as quickly as he could and bolted out the door. It slammed after him, shaking the hall. He stopped at the top of the spiral steps, panting and frightened. He was completely confused by the things Merlin had said. The Headmaster seemed to think James might be his enemy, and yet he wasn't sure. It was certainly a terrible thing to know that the only reason Merlin hadn't attacked him yet was because of the protection of the castle and the mysterious phantom scar on his forehead. Somehow, Merlin could see it, and he didn't know where it was coming from. But if Merlin wasn't causing it somehow, then who was? And what was it trying to tell him about the Headmaster?

"James?" Rose's voice called up from the bottom of the spiral stairs. "What are you doing? What's taking you so long?"

James glanced back at the Headmaster's closed door. He didn't know what it all meant, but he had a dreadful feeling that it was all going to become clear very soon. That fact alone scared him more than anything.

Thinking that, he ran down the spiral steps to join his friends.

That night, James sat at a table in the corner of the common room and took out a sheet of parchment. He dipped his quill, thought for a moment, and then began writing.

Dear Dad, How's everything going at home? I hope Grandma is having fun staying in my room. Make sure she doesn't look under the bed because that's where me and Al hid all those Dogerpillars we found, and I don't think we ever got them all cleared out. Also, tell her not to look on the top shelf of the closet. In fact, if she stayed out of the closet altogether, everybody will probably be a lot happier.

I heard the news about the Dementor attacks going on all over London, and I heard that the Ministry is starting a new Auror department to go put a stop to it. Look, it's too much to explain in a letter, but that job is going to be a lot more dangerous than it seems. Something really evil called the Gatekeeper came back with Merlin, and we think it's using the Dementors to feed on people's fear. If you want to know more about it, ask Cousin Lucy. She looked it up at the wizarding library for us, so she knows loads about it. You just need to watch out for it because it's really, really powerful—way more powerful than any regular old Dementor—and it's looking for a human host to give it all the power it needs to stay here for good and ruin everything.

That reminds me—Dad, do you remember a ring that Dumbledore gave you? It might not have been a ring, but a stone. I think I've heard you talk about it, from back when you had to go into the woods to fight V. Somebody here says he read about it in those books that came out about your life, and he says it was called the Resurrection Stone. Anyway, I need to ask—what happened to that stone? Rose and Ralph and me think that it might be really important for getting rid of the Gatekeeper. I promise not to tell anyone. Except Rose and Ralph. And maybe Zane if we think he can help. And maybe Cameron Creevey since he's the one that remembered about it in those books. But nobody else. OK? Thanks, Dad, Love, James. P.S. Have you and Mum found the M. Map and the I. Cloak and my voodoo doll yet?

James sealed the letter into an envelope and began to stuff it into his satchel. He stopped, suddenly wondering if he had time to send the letter tonight instead of tomorrow. He checked the clock and saw that it was only nine. He had time to get to the Owlery, and he knew he'd sleep better knowing that the letter was already on Nobby's leg, winging along to his parents' house. Rose had already gone up to bed, and Ralph was down in the Slytherin rooms, so James decided to go by himself. He stuffed the letter into his pocket and climbed through the portrait hole.

By the time James ascended the narrow steps into the Owlery, the moon had risen to a huge, full orb. Its frosty face illuminated the interior of the Owlery with silvery light, bright enough to see by. James found Nobby and paused to stroke him.

"They feed you all right up here?" James asked.

Nobby clicked his beak and ruffled his feathers luxuriously. James noticed that the corners of the Owlery floor were cluttered with the bones of rodents.

"I guess you get along just fine up here, don't you?" James said, smiling. The great bird seemed to agree. He ducked his head under James' stroking hand, preening. After a minute, James took the letter out of his pocket. He attached it carefully to Nobby's leg with a bit of string.

"This is really important, Nobby," James explained. "Get it to Dad as soon as possible, all right? And wait to see if he writes anything in return. If he does, bring it with you when you come back."

Nobby clicked his beak again and shuffled on the perch, obviously anxious to depart. As soon as James released his leg, Nobby spread his wings. He balanced for a moment, and then thrust upwards, flapping toward the Owlery's huge windows. He circled, disturbing some of the other owls on their perches, and then, with a flick of his rudderlike tail, he was gone.

James felt much better. He retraced his steps out of the Owlery and down the narrow stairway. When he got to the corridor below, he stopped. The halls had been almost entirely empty during his walk to the Owlery, but now someone was standing in the dark corridor, looking out one of the tall windows. James thought this was particularly odd since the Owlery was nowhere near any of the common rooms. The figure was in silhouette against the low full moon outside the window. James could only tell that the figure was a girl with long hair. He had a strange, fleeting hope that it was Petra, but he

didn't think so. James made his way along the hall and the girl didn't move as he approached. He had almost passed her when she spoke without turning around.

"A little late to be sending post," she mused. "Must be rather important, James."

James' blood cooled. It was Tabitha Corsica. "What's it to you?" he asked, not breaking his stride. He meant to leave her with that, but her next words brought him to a halt.

"The Gatekeeper won't be stopped, you know," she said idly, half turning to look at James over her shoulder. "No matter who you tell about it. It's too late for that."

James was stunned. His mind was racing so that he didn't know what to say. How could Tabitha know about the Gatekeeper? Neither James, Rose, nor Ralph had told anyone about it. But even as he wondered, he realized that the answer was all too obvious. Tabitha knew about the Gatekeeper because she was part of the plot to control it, to unleash in on the earth. There was simply no other explanation.

Tabitha turned back toward the moon. She leaned comfortably on the stone windowsill. "You believe you grasp what is happening, don't you? You've convinced yourself that you understand the full implications of the Curse of the Gatekeeper." She laughed lightly. "That's what I love about you Potters. You all see the world in the plainest terms. You somehow manage to miss the essential details and the big picture. Never has it been more obvious than now."

James started to speak, but his voice was hoarse and frightened. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Are you here to stop me?"

"Stop you?" Tabitha replied, still not turning around. "Stop you from what? Didn't you hear me? It's too late to stop anything. The descent of the Gatekeeper is accomplished. Its day is at hand. There is only one more task to complete, and that task is very nearly done. I'm only here now to gloat, James. I wanted to see your face when you found out that your world was about to end." Finally, Tabitha turned fully around. James took an involuntary step backwards. He'd never seen Tabitha this way. Her hair was lank and her face looked very pale, even gaunt. Her eyes were tinged with red, avid and hungry.

"Yes," she breathed, leaning slightly forward. "That's the expression I was hoping for. You see it now, don't you? The Curse of the Gatekeeper is finally at hand, but it isn't a curse for everyone. It will end your world, and the blighted world of the Muggles, but it will not be a curse to those who've remained pure of heart. It will be a blessing to us. Salazar Slytherin knew it in his time, when he orchestrated this day. The descent of the Gatekeeper hearkens the age of pureblood perfection! No longer will we be shackled by the laws of weak governments, no more will we live in the shadows of the Muggle drones, hiding like beetles under a rock. For us, the Gatekeeper is a harbinger of supremacy!"

James took another step backwards, wilting in the ferocity of that mad gaze. "You… you can't really believe that," he stammered. "No one controls the Gatekeeper. It'll bring doom to everyone and

everything. Even its human host will be killed by it in the end."

Tabitha smiled slowly. "How curious that you believe no one can control the Gatekeeper. And yet I know why you have clung to that belief. You persist in trusting Merlinus Ambrosius, whose very presence in this age is your doing. You convince yourself that, in the end, he will not side with us. This offers you a shred of hope, doesn't it?"

James nodded. He hadn't known it until this moment, but Tabitha was right. In the deepest part of James' heart, he did trust Merlin. He didn't know exactly why, but he did. Despite his doubts and fears and despite all the evidence to the contrary, James simply didn't believe that Merlin would use the Beacon Stone for evil. He believed that Merlin would use it instead to battle the Gatekeeper, even if it was a losing battle.

Tabitha's smile grew indulgent. "Cherish that hope as long as you can, James," she said, almost whispering. "And when the Gatekeeper is ours, when Merlin hands the stone over and joins us, I hope I can be there to see the light of that hope die in your eyes. I really do."

James finally began to feel some anger. He drew himself to his full height and took a step forward. "You're lying," he said firmly. "You're just trying to scare me. You know that your plans can still be stopped. It isn't too late, no matter what you say. You can tell whoever put you up to this that you've given me your message, for all the good it did. But I'm not going to back down. We'll find the other half of the Beacon Stone."

Tabitha's smile vanished as James said this. She looked at him with something like open bewilderment. And then, slowly, the smile resurfaced, dawning on her face like a sunrise. "The other half of the Beacon Stone?" she said in an amused voice. "You don't yet realize it, do you? No wonder you've been so full of vim and vigor! My dear James, we already have the 'other half' of the Beacon Stone! It's been in our possession for years! We used our arts to seek it out. It wasn't particularly difficult, you know. Your father simply dropped it in the Forbidden Forest. He left it for anyone to find if they had an inkling of where to look. I was there on the very night that it was pulled from the earth!" Tabitha laughed again, lightly, and yet James heard a tinkling madness in it. She stopped, inhaled, and shook her head. "How dreadfully unfortunate for you, James. But, oh! That's what that letter to your father was about, wasn't it? You were asking him where the stone had gone! Oh, I really am so sorry that you've wasted your time. But now you do see how precarious your situation is, don't you? It really is only a matter of Merlinus' rather famously fickle loyalties. How deliciously exciting this must be for you!"

James' anger hadn't abated in the face of this revelation. If anything, it had intensified. "I don't believe you, Corsica. You'll say anything just to keep me from working against you. It won't work! Even if your people do have half of the Beacon Stone, Merlin won't join you. I won't let him! So tell your cronies that I got your message, and that I told the lot of you to stuff it where the Nargles don't bite."

With that, James turned on his heel and began to stalk away. After a few steps, he stopped and looked back. "And I'll tell you one more thing, and this is just for you, Corsica: I know you think you've got

my brother wrapped around your little finger, but if you get him involved in this in any way, I will personally come for you. Don't think I don't mean that."

"Albus?" Tabitha said, the smile now gone from her face. "I think he's big enough to make his own decisions, don't you?"

James narrowed his eyes and nodded slowly. "You bet he is."

As James turned again and stalked off, Tabitha called after him, her voice echoing in the corridor, "Cherish that hope, James… Cherish it for as long as you can…"

James was shaking by the time he climbed back through the portrait hole. The encounter with Tabitha had completely unnerved him despite his brave words. It was all too overwhelming. Was it true that James' dad had simply dropped the Resurrection Stone in the Forest before his confrontation with Voldemort? If Tabitha and her secret cohorts did indeed have half of the Beacon Stone already, what hope was there? James now realized that, in spite of everything, he did trust Merlin not to side with evil. But was it that Merlin was trustworthy, or that James simply couldn't face the possibility that the famous sorcerer might betray them? With a shudder, he remembered that Judith, the Lady of the Lake, had also trusted Merlin, right up until the point that he'd killed her. Strangely, in the face of all of this, all James wanted to do was go to bed and sleep.

He climbed to his dormitory, stripped off his clothes, and fell into bed. The moon shone in through the small window across the room, needling at his eyes. James rolled over, pulling his pillow over his face. It wasn't until he was almost asleep, just as all of his racing thoughts were finally quieting, that one final, strangely worrying question popped into his head. James sat up, staring out the window at that bright, silvery moon while the question repeated itself in his mind: how had Tabitha Corsica known that he was at the Owlery?

James stared hard at the moon, but it offered no answers. He flopped back onto his pillow. Finally, eventually, he fell asleep.

17. The Bloodline

The next week seemed to shuttle past with the inertia of a freight train. As the end of the term loomed, the library grew busier and busier. The older students moved about in a sort of harried fog, studying and drilling each other on topics James could barely understand. Even the Gremlins seemed tense. Noah, Sabrina, Damien, and Petra sat on the couch before the fireplace, surrounded by loose parchments, books, and candy wrappers. James waved at them as he passed, heading down to the library.

"Hey, Damien," he said, "thanks for helping out in the Headmaster's office the other day."

"Just doing my job," Damien muttered, his nose buried in a huge book of star charts.

On the way down to the library, James considered the events of the previous days. It was all moving so fast that it was becoming hard to keep track of. On Monday, James had informed Scorpius that he, Ralph, and Rose had been ordered to shut down the Defence Club as punishment for sneaking into Hogsmeade. Scorpius had been strangely unperturbed.

"A pity that you won't be able to keep attending," he'd said blithely, looking up over his glasses from the book he'd been studying.

"I don't think you understand," James said, sitting down. "The club's been disbanded. Merlin ordered it."

Scorpius looked down at his book again, turning a page. "I understand it as well as I wish. As far as I'm concerned, you three have been banned from leading the club. As co-teacher, I've no intention of shutting it down. We'll rename it if necessary. We'll call it, oh, 'Scorpius' Army'."

"That's not funny," James said, shaking his head.

"No?" Scorpius replied. "Well, I sat up all night thinking of it. So, drat."

James thought about it for a moment, and then asked quietly, "You'll really keep teaching the club? Even though Merlin thinks it's been shut down?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean," Scorpius answered. "If the Headmaster has determined that the Defence Club should be dissolved, then dissolved it will be. It's pure and simple coincidence that I, along with the Specter of Silence and the Grey Lady, will be teaching an entirely new club that happens to meet in the same place at the same time to study the same topics. Surely, the Headmaster would recognize the difference."

James shook his head, smiling crookedly. "You really are a chip off the old Slytherin block, aren't you? You're as twisted as a corkscrew!"

"Being twisted simply means being able to think around corners," Scorpius said, returning to his book. "My father taught me that."

James started to get up, then stopped and looked back at the pale boy. "Cedric actually has you calling him the 'Specter of Silence'?"

Scorpius adjusted his glasses. "Who am I to argue with a ghost's choice of name?"

Apparently, Scorpius had been as good as his word. On Thursday evening, James, Rose, and Ralph had hovered in the halls near the gymnasium. Sure enough, as they passed the pebbled glass doors, they could hear the sounds of the club, practicing and drilling under Cedric's and the Grey Lady's patient tutelage.

Preparations for *The Triumvirate* were also coming along swiftly. Jason Smith's props crew was working double-time, having produced most of the sets and prop elements, including a huge wind machine that worked on treadle power. Gennifer Tellus was feverishly commanding her costume shop, managing all the adjustments, alterations and last-minute costuming details. Josephina Bartlett had recovered from her hex-induced vertigo enough to climb onto the stage, although she couldn't approach the edge without getting dizzy. Nevertheless, a contingent of Ravenclaw girls had begun a rather snarky campaign to reinstate Josephina in the role of Astra. To that end, they had painted a slew of signs and pinned petitions onto several notice boards. The petitions hadn't accumulated many signatures, however, and apart from Josephina's entourage, even the rest of the Ravenclaws seemed to quietly support Petra in the role. For his own part, James was impressed to realize that he had now learned almost all of his lines. There had been a time when he hardly believed it was possible, but the persistent rehearsals and late-night script readings had apparently paid off. Noah and Petra seemed by turns affectionate and cold during rehearsals, obviously reflecting the ongoing tumult of their relationship. James had still not practiced his kissing scene with Petra, although they'd read through the lines a dozen times. Professor Curry assured them that it need not be a real kiss, but simply that they lean toward one another and touch cheeks. They'd be in silhouette to the audience, and the lights would go out the moment the kiss occurred, thus ending act three. To James' great dismay, however, he was forced to obey Tabitha Corsica's direction whenever Professor Curry wasn't around. Tabitha seemed to take perverse pleasure in forcing James to recite his monologues over and over, constantly critiquing him and belittling him in front of the other actors and crew. As James sweated in the bright stage lights, rereading his rallying speech for the ninth time, his dislike of Tabitha's pretty, smug face slowly intensified into a bright little furnace of hatred.

The Quidditch season had finally ended with a smashing victory by Hufflepuff over Gryffindor, resulting in days of merciless taunting by the Hufflepuffs and surly retorts from the Gryffindors. To commemorate Albus' first season as Slytherin Seeker, Tabitha had apparently given him the broom he'd been flying all season, the same mysteriously hexed broom which had caused James, Ralph, and Zane so much trouble during the previous year. James could hardly believe that Tabitha would relinquish the broom, but he also knew it would only serve to endear Albus all the more to his Slytherin mates. Besides, if Tabitha was turning over something as powerful as that broom, it would only be because she had something even more powerful in her possession.

And then, this very morning, James had finally received a letter back from his father. He'd read it over breakfast with both Ralph and Rose peering closely over his shoulder.

Dear James,

Sorry about the late response, but I've been terribly busy with this new Auror subdepartment. We've called in Kingsley to give us a hand with it, and he's been a great help both in organizing and preparing the field team for what they'll be up against. Believe it or not, even K. Debellows has offered his assistance. Turns out the Harriers faced a Dementor hive like this once in Hungary. Viktor has his squad on standby, just in case, so that's a relief.

Spot on about this Gatekeeper business. Our researchers at the Ministry had already begun to piece together some details about it. We have old Dung Fletcher in protective custody, and he had an inkling that the people who orchestrated last year's conspiracy were working toward something big like this. We're quite confident that this whole 'Curse of the Gatekeeper' story is just a massive scare tactic. The P.E. is still at work trying to secretly destabilize the magical world, and what better way to do it than to invent a grave new threat that the Ministry isn't able to contain, eh? Don't worry. We've got the best people on it, including me. Still, be sure that we won't be taking any chances, all right? If there really is something behind this besides a load of rogue Dementors, we'll be on the lookout for it.

Regarding the R. Stone, you can always ask me whatever you want, James. Tell your friend Cameron I remember his uncle well and that he's right about the stone. After I used it in the Forest that night, I dropped it. I didn't need it anymore, and it was best lost to the wizarding world forever. I'd guess it's still out there somewhere, but even I could probably never find it again. I strongly recommend that you not go looking for it. It'll only mean trouble. Let it stay lost, all right?

Love, Your Father

P.S. No, still no sign of what's gone missing, but honestly, I haven't had much time to look for them. Mum and Grandma say hello. Grandma is staying in Albus' room, so you don't have anything to worry about. See you in a few weeks!

James arrived in the dim library and wandered through the aisles and shelves until he found Ralph

and Rose, who were deep in conversation. He plunked his satchel onto the table and sat down next to Rose.

"We spoke to Zane a little while ago," Ralph announced. "He popped up right here in the library. Made Professor Heretofore ten shades of mad. She refused to let us zap him with any spells to maintain his projection, but he did give us a quick message."

James leaned in. "What was it?"

"Apparently he went to see Madame Delacroix in person," Rose said in a low voice. "She's pretty dotty, but he got some useful information out of her about what the wrong people might be able to do with your voodoo doll."

"What?" James asked fervently. "Tell me!"

"Exactly bupkis," Ralph replied, curling his hand into the shape of a zero.

"More or less," Rose added, glancing at Ralph. "Your dad was right, James, when he said that voodoo wasn't like what the Muggle films show. It's apparently mostly psychological. Pinning a voodoo doll in the heart doesn't kill the subject, but it might make them sad or lonely."

"Or give them heartburn," Ralph quipped.

Rose rolled her eyes. "The point is no one can physically hurt you with a voodoo doll. They may be able to make you believe you feel pain, or certain emotions, but that's all."

James breathed a huge sigh. "Well, that's a big relief, I guess."

"Still," Ralph asked, "who do you think might have it?"

"Probably nobody," James answered. "It wasn't with the Cloak or the map. It was just on my mum's bedside table. It's probably just lost at home like my dad said."

"Maybe Tabitha has it!" Rose whispered conspiratorially. "Maybe she doesn't know she can't hurt you with it! She's probably going mad wondering why it isn't working!"

James shook his head. "That's daft, Rose. Tabitha wouldn't have any way of getting it even if she knew about it. I never told anyone other than you, Ralph, and Zane about it. Besides, Tabitha doesn't need a voodoo doll to get at me. She could've fought me that night in the hall. Obviously she's not meaning to attack us with magic or anything."

"At least not *yet,"* Ralph muttered. Suddenly, a low whistle pierced the air. It wasn't particularly loud, but it was noisy enough to disturb those studying nearby. At the next table, Ashley Doone glanced up curiously, looking for the source of the whistle.

"What's that?" Rose rasped. "Ralph, I think it's coming from your bag!"

Ralph scrambled around in his seat, retrieving his bag. As soon as he unzipped it, the noise grew louder.

"It's Trenton's Sneakoscope!" Ralph said, pulling the instrument out of his bag. The noise was increasing both in pitch and volume.

"Mr. Deedle!" a voice called stridently. James turned in his seat and saw Professor Heretofore approaching along the aisle, her sharp features pinched into a scowl. "How many times must you insist on disrupting this library?"

"Sorry," Ralph said, still fiddling with the Sneakoscope. "It must be malfunctioning. I can't see how to turn it off!"

Professor Heretofore shook her head in disdain. She produced her wand and flicked it deftly. The Sneakoscope emitted a sudden squawk and fell silent.

"There," she said venomously. "It's off. Now please vacate yourselves from the library, the three of you. If I see you in here again for the rest of the day, there will be deducted House points, even if you are a member of my house, Mr. Deedle. Now off with you."

"Stupid hunk of junk," Ralph muttered as they threaded toward the door. He stuffed the Sneakoscope in his bag and shouldered it.

"It wasn't malfunctioning," a voice drawled. James glanced up as Scorpius fell in line with them, walking out of the library. "It was doing exactly what it was meant to do."

"Getting us kicked out of the library?" Ralph asked derisively.

Scorpius lowered his voice. "No, Deedle. Alerting you to the presence of untrustworthy people."

James frowned at Scorpius. "What do you mean?"

"Not here," Scorpius said. "Follow me. I'll tell you what I can along the way."

For several minutes, Scorpius led James, Ralph, and Rose through the halls silently. Eventually, they came to an old part of the castle which was rarely used. It smelled vaguely moldy. They passed no one else in the halls.

"I understand you had a rather illuminating conversation with 'Tabby'," Scorpius finally said, glancing at James as he walked.

"How do you know about that?"

"I hear things," Scorpius replied vaguely. "Tabitha has somehow come to believe that I am a Slytherin in disguise. She thinks that I detest the lot of you and am therefore on their side."

"You had me fooled for awhile too, you know," James admitted. "My bed still has the words 'Whiny Potter Git' on it."

"Where are we going, Scorpius?" Rose asked suspiciously. "It looks like we're headed to the same place where we found the Mirror of Erised."

Scorpius nodded. "That's the spot, Weasley. Nothing gets past you."

"Scorpius," James said, narrowing his eyes, "if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were nervous."

Scorpius stopped suddenly in the hall. He turned to face the other three. "What I'm about to do, I do against my better judgment," he said in a low, serious voice. "If my grandfather knew what I was about to show you, he'd probably kill me, and that's not an exaggeration."

"What, Scorpius?" James asked, lowering his own voice to match the pale boy's. "Do you know something?"

Scorpius looked away. "Remember when I told you that I hadn't seen my grandfather for years? That he was in hiding, even from the rest of the family?"

James and Rose nodded. James said, "It's not true? He's not in hiding?"

"Yes, he's in hiding. But it isn't true that I haven't seen him. I've seen him plenty." Scorpius sighed and looked at James, Ralph, and Rose. "It started two years ago. I hated the way my father had turned his back on his upbringing. The reason he'd begun studying the founders was to find out the truth about Salazar Slytherin. He'd been raised to believe that Slytherin was a revolutionary thinker and a hero, but the more my father studied, the more he began to believe that Slytherin had simply been a vicious, power-hungry madman. When I was quite young, Father and Grandfather had a serious row about it. They ended up wand to wand, although neither actually cast a spell. It disgusted me that my father would deny his family heritage. Once Grandfather disowned my father and moved into hiding, I determined to join him and prove my loyalty. My mother helped me locate Grandfather Lucius. He was quite happy to have me visit him in secret. He told me of his plans. Yes, I know about the Gatekeeper and how it came to descend into the world. I know that my grandfather believes he is carrying out the final solution of Salazar Slytherin, finally bringing about a world of pureblood perfection. But the more I listened to my grandfather, the more I realized he'd gone completely mad. Both he and his partner, Gregor Tyrranicus. Gregor was once wizarding royalty in Romania, but he lost power and was kicked out by his own family. Both he and my Grandfather Lucius will do anything to get that power back, and more. They truly mean to be rulers of a new pureblood kingdom with the Gatekeeper as their strong-arm."

"So they really do think they can control it," Rose breathed. "They are mad!"

"They're mad, yes," Scorpius answered. "But who's to say they can't control it? If they can possess both halves of the Beacon Stone, they may indeed be able to protect themselves and their kingdom from the Gatekeeper, although it will hate them all the more for it, and will destroy them all the

quicker if they get careless."

"So what is it you want to show us?" James asked, firming his jaw. "What does your grandfather not want us to know?"

Scorpius seemed to be struggling with himself. His eyes were locked on James', his lips pressed together. Finally, the boy nodded slightly. "Come on," he said, and quickly turned.

They walked a little way further until they came to a large, heavy door. Scorpius produced a tarnished brass key and turned it in the lock.

"My father gave me this key so I could help you come back through the Mirror, Potter," Scorpius explained, pushing the heavy door open. "I don't know how he came to possess it, but I suspect it had something to do with one of the lesser known shops in the dark corners of Knockturn Alley. Still, I doubt even my father knew what this key would also give me access to."

"What's the big deal?" Ralph asked as they entered the cramped storage room again. The Mirror of Erised showed their reflections in its dusty surface. All around it were crates, trunks, and locked cabinets.

"Don't look too closely into the Mirror," Scorpius said, walking past it and approaching one of the cabinets. "Without its Focusing Book, it'll just show you distractions. The real surprise is over here."

"Whose stuff is all this?" Rose asked, looking around slowly. "I thought it was just a bunch of stored junk when we were here last, but that was before I knew how powerful the Mirror was and where it came from. Nobody would just throw that in with a bunch of random crates."

Scorpius wrenched a lock loose from one the cabinets and swung the door open. "All of this," he said, glancing back at Rose, "is the contents of Albus Dumbledore's office while he was Headmaster. He'd willed most of it to his brother, Aberforth, but when Aberforth died, he willed it right back to the school. It's all been stored here ever since, hidden even from the new headmasters according to Aberforth's instructions. Not the most trusting fellow, was old Aberforth. We'd never have found it at all if we hadn't used Ravenclaw's signal to locate the Mirror."

"Wow," James breathed in awe. "I bet my dad would love to know about this place. He and Dumbledore were pretty close. Look! Is that Fawkes the phoenix's perch? I bet it is!"

"This stuff is probably really valuable," Rose said, picking up a heavy book from a table. "Most of these books are one-of-a-kind. They're hand-printed and illustrated…"

"That's all well and good," Scorpius said, stepping aside and gesturing at the open cabinet. "But this is why I brought you here."

Ralph and James peered into the cabinet, confused at the display of dusty tools and ancient gadgets. A large bowl-shaped object on the top shelf emitted a pale glow. Rose gasped, her eyes going wide.

"Is that the Pensieve?" she whispered. "Dumbledore's Pensieve?"

Scorpius nodded. "I came here once on my own, the night before James' return. I sneaked out of the dorm and used Ravenclaw's signal to find this room. I wanted to be sure it really existed. When I found it, I explored a little and found the Pensieve. It contains many of Headmaster Dumbledore's memories, and Severus Snape's as well, since Snape apparently kept it in the Headmaster's office and used it after Dumbledore died. I knew the memories would be rather faded now that Dumbledore and Snape are both dead, but there was one set of memories in particular I was curious about. Grandfather Lucius had already told me his side of the story, but I wanted to see if Dumbledore's and Snape's version was any different. It was—a little."

James asked in a low voice, "What's the memory about, Scorpius?"

Scorpius looked James in the eye again. He didn't blink as he answered. "Something my grandfather and Gregor call 'the Bloodline'. It's about who the Bloodline of Voldemort is, and how they came to be."

There was a long moment of perfect silence, and then, firmly, James said, "I want to see."

Scorpius nodded. "I thought you might." He gestured at the gently glowing bowl.

"How does it work?" Ralph asked, following reluctantly as James and Rose stepped forward. "Does it, like, make a film or something? How does it know what memory we want to see? Will it hurt?"

"Shut up, Ralph," James said, not unkindly. "Just hold my hand. You too, Rose. I think we just have to look. That's all."

Slowly, carefully, James, Rose, and Ralph leaned over the stone bowl. The surface of the liquid inside the Pensieve looked uncomfortably like the swirling mercury smoke in Merlin's Magic Mirror except that it glowed rather more. It lit the three student's faces. And then something began to swim up out of the depths of the Pensieve. It seemed to come from far deeper than the mere depth of the bowl. James held his breath as the light intensified. The swirling increased, becoming larger as the liquid in the bowl rose. It filled James' vision and then, swiftly and painlessly, it seemed to grab him. At once, James, Rose, and Ralph fell into the Pensieve as if it had grown to the size of a pool. It swallowed them completely, and for better or worse, there was no turning back. They were a part of the faded memories of Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape.

Each of the three experienced it uniquely and separately. When James landed in the middle of the first

memory, neither Ralph nor Rose was anywhere in sight. As Scorpius had said, the memories were slightly faded; James felt more as if he was dreaming them than living them. As the world of the memory resolved around him, he found himself standing in the Headmaster's office, but not as he'd ever known it. It rippled and swam, like a scene witnessed underwater, but then it began to solidify. Fawkes the phoenix preened on his perch, proving to James that he was seeing the room as it had looked during Dumbledore's term as Headmaster.

"We must be prepared for the eventuality, Severus," Dumbledore was saying, not looking at Snape, who stood by the window, looking out at a black sky. "It cannot be assumed that Voldemort will be too proud to resort to such a tactic. If he comes to fear that his plans—and therefore his life—are in jeopardy, we must assume he will prepare a successor of some kind."

"The Dark Lord is not given to preparations for failure, Headmaster," Snape said. "His vanity will not admit the possibility of defeat. The sheer number of Horcruxes he has prepared are evidence of his assurance."

"I disagree," Dumbledore said, steepling his fingers as he sat at his desk. James saw that one of the old headmaster's hands was rather horribly blackened and sickly. "One Horcrux would be enough for a confident villain. Voldemort's substantial collection of them proves quite the reverse. He lives in terror of death, believing nothing but the most extreme measures will ward it off. This is not the behavior of a man confident in his immortality. If, in time, he fears that even this collection will fail him, he will turn to even more desperate measures. You will know this when the time comes, and if it does, your duty will be clear."

Snape turned away from the window and approached the desk. "It pains me to admit it, but this task is very nearly beyond me, Headmaster. You are far better equipped to manage it than am I."

Dumbledore nodded slowly and smiled. "I will not argue that, Severus, but we both know it is unlikely that I should still be alive when the time comes. The task falls to you by default. Nevertheless, I am quite confident in your ability to do what is necessary. Despite what you believe of yourself, you are rather uniquely qualified for this type of work…"

As Dumbledore said this, the memory slowly dissolved. The room faded into obscurity and both Snape and Dumbledore vanished. An indeterminate amount of time seemed to pass, and then James found another memory solidifying around him. He was in a drawing room in a grand house, although it was apparent that the house was quite old and its best days were behind it. A large crystal chandelier lay shattered on the floor like a corpse. Bits of broken crystal lay everywhere, sparkling in the firelight.

"Potter," a high, silky voice said. James turned to see a horrible cloaked figure standing in front of the hearth. It was like a man, but only just. Beneath the cowl, the face was so pale as to be nearly translucent. There was no nose, save for a pair of grotesquely flaring slits, and the red eyes glowed with thin vertical pupils. James' knees went weak with fear as the figure seemed to stare coldly at him, but then it turned its gaze away, looking askance at a woman huddled at the end of a nearby sofa.

"I thought I was quite clear," the high, cold voice went on, and James now recognized the figure for who it was. This was Voldemort himself, in the flesh. "I was not to be disturbed for anything other than Harry Potter. Bellatrix here assures me I was, indeed, rather specific about that requirement. And yet she herself is the one responsible for interrupting my work *without* any Harry Potter to present me upon my return."

Bellatrix sobbed and rolled off the sofa, throwing herself onto the floor at Voldemort's feet. "He was here, my Lord! I tell you: he was my prisoner when I summoned you; otherwise, I would never have dared! Lucius and Narcissa can attest to the fact! But we were betrayed at the last minute—" Bellatrix flung an arm toward a man James hadn't noticed yet. The man stood in the shadows, his face deathly pale and blank. His hair was long and white. "Tell him, Lucius!" Bellatrix implored. "Tell the Dark Lord that we had Potter in our grasp!" When the man didn't respond, Bellatrix's face contorted into desperate rage. "Then perhaps you should tell him how you were bested by the boy Potter! Tell him, Lucius, how you were Stunned unconscious mere moments after they burst upon us! Tell him!"

"Severus," Voldemort said, ignoring the woman's raving, sobbing protests, "this unfortunate occasion has pressed me to consider an option that I had hoped would be unnecessary."

James turned and saw Snape standing in front of the closed door of the drawing room. He knew neither Snape nor Voldemort could see him; nevertheless, he felt very uncomfortable standing between them as they spoke. He moved into a nearby corner opposite the staring figure of Lucius Malfoy. Snape merely stood and waited, looking unflinchingly at the awful, snakelike face.

"I have summoned you from your post for the same reason I have dismissed Narcissa, Greyback, and Lucius' son. No one else need know of the duty I am placing upon you. Lucius himself will have his own role if he chooses to accept it; I have every expectation that he will be eager to prove his worth after recent events. But you, Severus, will perform a very important duty in this arrangement."

"Whatever you wish, my Lord," Snape said evenly.

Voldemort went on, stepping away from the hearth. "As you know, Severus, I have prepared Horcruxes, creating an unbroken chain of immortality for my ascendance…"

As Voldemort slowly crossed the room, the broken chandelier rose silently from the floor, allowing him to pass beneath it. The shattered bits of crystal rose with it, turning and glinting in the air like water droplets.

"I am quite confident that these Horcruxes will serve me well; however, in the extremely *unlikely* event that any of them should be destroyed—"

"Never, my Lord!" Bellatrix cried, still groveling on the floor. "It is impossible!"

"—I have prepared one final Horcrux," Voldemort went on, completely ignoring Bellatrix's outburst. "It is rather unique. In fact, I am quite confident that such a thing has never before been created."

Voldemort reached the center of the room and stopped. As the broken chandelier hovered over him, he reached slowly into his cloak and produced a long, narrow dagger. It was singularly ugly, made of silver with a jewel-encrusted handle. The blade was tarnished to a dark glint, as if it had been rubbed with soot.

"This dagger," Voldemort went on, turning it slowly in the firelight, "is rather special to me. It has travelled with me long and served me on many occasions. You may be interested to know that it once belonged to my father. I took it as an inheritance from his dead hand. Thus, it is quite fitting that this dagger, Severus, is the final and perhaps most important of my Horcruxes. I am entrusting you to safeguard it within the protection of Hogwarts until the time comes for its use."

"I will guard it with my life, my Lord," Snape said, inclining his head. "I am honored to be entrusted with a task that will only add to your long life."

"Alas, Severus," Voldemort said, pulling the dagger away, as if reluctant to give it up. "This is not that sort of Horcrux. With this relic, I am thinking only of future generations. Never let it be said that your Lord is not gracious, for this Horcrux is not to be used for myself. As I have already told you, this Horcrux is *special*. The part of my soul that it contains is shut off from me forever. I cannot reclaim it. Thus, if, in the remarkable and unimaginable event that every Horcrux but this were destroyed, this dagger would not assure my survival."

Bellatrix gasped, but her eyes were huge and avid as she watched Voldemort. Her gaze never left the dagger as it flitted and glinted in his pale hand.

"The part of my soul locked within this dagger is a gift, my friends. It is meant to be passed on. Lucius, my loyal servant, I have asked you to remain because I know your desperate—and justifiable—desire to prove yourself to me. It shall be your duty and honor to bestow the gift of the dagger should that day ever come."

For the first time, Lucius Malfoy's face flickered with life. He blinked at Voldemort, and then stumbled forward, not quite daring to touch his master.

"Thank you, my Lord! It is my honor! I will not fail you!"

"I am certain of that, Lucius," Voldemort said smoothly, almost kindly. "For if, for some reason, you fail the dagger, it will find you. I have bound it to you, and your family. In the event that something unfortunate befalls Headmaster Snape, you must retrieve the dagger from him. It will be waiting for you. And in the event that the time passes for its use and you have not fulfilled your role, it will seek you with its own intent. It will come for you, and your family. I do trust that you understand."

"I do, my Lord," Lucius rasped, nodding. "I will perform whatever duty you entrust to me. I vow my oath, Master!"

Voldemort nodded slowly. "Then your work begins this day, Lucius. Find for me a worthy vessel. Find a family whose blood is pure but whose loyalties will never be suspect. When the time comes,

go to the woman in that family who is with child. She must take the dagger unto herself, and by her own hand, use the dagger to trace my symbol—the first initial of my name—upon the swell of her unborn son, drawing it in her own blood. Let her willingness infuse the life of the dagger into that mother's blood, taking it to the child. Thus, this relic of my soul will be passed on. The boy will carry my essence, made anew, ready to serve yet another generation. This is your duty and your oath to me, Lucius. Swear it."

"I swear, my Lord!" Lucius rasped, falling to one knee.

"My Lord!" Bellatrix cried breathlessly, crawling to her knees and imploring with one hand. "Choose me! Let me be the vessel of your gift to future generations! I will raise the boy to be your perfect image! I am willing! I am eager!"

"Yes, loyal Bellatrix," Voldemort said softly, not turning to her. Bits of the floating crystal chandelier revolved in the air between them. "But your loyalties are your most damning quality for this task. No one must guess in whose womb my soul is to be reborn. Despite your greatest wish, this duty cannot fall to you."

Bellatrix sobbed. "Then why have you kept me here, my Lord?" she wailed desperately. "Why have you retained me only to see my greatest desire plucked from my grasp?"

Voldemort sighed indulgently. "Your very question contains the answer, dear Bellatrix. But do try to look on the bright side: I had considered simply killing you for allowing Harry Potter to slip through your grasp this night. Instead, I have merely killed your greatest dream."

"Nooooo!" Bellatrix shrieked, crumpling, and James' hair stood up. He'd never heard a more despairing, hopeless cry.

Voldemort strode forward, smiling as if Bellatrix's wail of agony was the sweetest music. He held the dagger out to Snape. As Snape took the dagger, the suspended chandelier fell again. It crashed noisily to the floor behind Voldemort, shattering like a bomb and drowning out the pitiful wail of Bellatrix Lestrange.

The memory shattered as well.

There was a flash of swirling smoke, and then one more scene materialized, swimming out of the mists like a fever dream. In this memory, James saw Severus Snape again. He was pacing in the Headmaster's office, which was his own office by this time.

"You seem to misunderstand, Albus," Snape said, speaking apparently to the portrait of Dumbledore on the office wall. "It will not be a request. Slughorn is the man responsible for the Dark Lord's ability to create Horcruxes in the first place. He understands them better than I do. He owes his service to the world to render this one useless."

"If only that were possible, Severus," the portrait of Dumbledore replied. "But it is not. You may

destroy the Horcrux, yes, but *no* one can simply render it ineffective. Besides, I seem to recall that my instruction was to simply poison the instrument, assuring it would kill both the mother and the son it was meant to infiltrate."

"I cannot destroy the dagger while the Dark Lord still lives," Snape replied. "He has bound it to Lucius Malfoy; he will know if it is compromised, and my loyalties will be revealed."

"Then do as I instructed," Dumbledore insisted ardently. "Poison the blade. It is within your abilities. There are any number of undetectable poisons in this very room. Let the same instrument that carries that dark soul also carry its doom."

"You might have been able to oversee the murder of the woman and her child 'for the greater good', Albus, but I'm afraid that that ability has fled me."

The portrait replied sadly. "Then you are a fool, Severus. The fruit of this Horcrux will be on your head, not Horace Slughorn's."

Snape exhaled slowly, thinking. Finally, he glanced up. "Perhaps not," he said, as if to himself. "Perhaps there is another way."

"You are mistaken, Severus," Dumbledore replied. "My way is the only responsible method. Otherwise, the boy will be born with the thread of Voldemort himself beating in his veins."

Snape smiled slowly, coldly. "Perhaps not…," he said again.

"Surely you do not doubt that the dagger Horcrux will transmit the remnant of Voldemort's soul?"

"I do not," Snape said, narrowing his eyes. "But perhaps it will not be transmitted into a boy…"

Dumbledore sighed patiently. "This is not the time for conspiracies, Severus."

"Indulge me," Snape replied slowly. "I am merely speculating. The Dark Lord believes his soul will pass into a boy child. He is, in his heart, that most arrogant of men, the sort that believes unquestioningly in the superiority of his own gender. But what if Lucius' judgment were to become impaired? What if his divinations were clouded? And as a result, what if the final Horcrux were transmitted to a girl child?"

"That is not evidence that his soul would not dominate the child's personality. She would still be influenced by his living essence."

"His quintessentially *male* essence," Snape muttered, hardly listening to the portrait. "But how would that balance against the unexpected polarity of her own female heart? How indeed…"

The portrait interrupted gently. "This is speculative foolishness, my friend. I tell you: poison the dagger, or if you cannot, destroy it when the proper time comes."

Snape looked up at the portrait, his eyes narrowed. He took the dagger out of his robes and held it in his hands. It glinted darkly, just as ugly as James had last seen it. Snape nodded.

"Yes," he agreed. "You're right, of course, Albus. When the time is right. I cannot destroy the Horcrux yet; there is too much at stake for my loyalties to be challenged. In the meantime, however, perhaps I will experiment. Lucius Malfoy is bonded to the dagger. I may be able to use that bond, pervert it, cause it to cloud his mind in the event that it does survive. If Lucius succeeds in using the dagger, he will 'accidentally' use it on an unborn girl child, thus foiling his master's wishes. Perhaps, just perhaps, that would be enough to tip the balance. Otherwise, I will destroy the Horcrux myself when the time is right."

"Forgive me, Severus," Dumbledore said, looking him evenly in the eye, "but what if you do not live that long?"

"I have more than one reason to stay alive, Albus," Snape answered, slipping the dagger back into his robes. "And as you well know, destroying this mysterious object is not even the most important. Trust me, I shall be careful."

On Snape's last word—careful—the memory rippled and faded. Swirling, silvery smoke filled James' vision and he realized he was leaning on something hard. It was uncomfortable, so he pushed back from it. As he did, he drew his face away from the bowl of Dumbledore's Pensieve, disoriented and dizzy. Ralph and Rose pulled away at the same moment. They clutched at each other, struggling to stay upright.

"Did you see it?" Scorpius asked. James blinked, recovering his balance. Scorpius was seated on a trunk in the corner of the storage room, leaning languidly against the wall. "Did you see the dagger?"

"I did," James said. "Did you, Rose? And Ralph? I never saw either of you in there."

Rose shook her head in dismay. "I saw it all. I saw Headmaster Dumbledore and Professor Snape talking about the possibility of some sort of successor. And then… I saw *him.* He Who Must Not Be Named. He was awful."

"I didn't understand a lot of what he said, but I think I got the gist of it," Ralph said, his face pale. "Those Horcrux things were supposed to keep little bits of Voldemort's soul safe, so even if he got killed, he wouldn't really die, right?"

"But the last Horcrux, the one embedded in his father's dagger, was different," Rose nodded. "He couldn't reclaim that part again, no matter what. It was meant to be passed on to a baby boy, carrying that bit of his soul to a new life."

James furrowed his brow. "But why would someone so obsessed with immortality waste a Horcrux on someone else's life?"

Ralph shrugged as if the answer was obvious. "It's still his life, but hidden away. Who'd suspect it?

As long as Voldemort was inside Voldemort, all the good wizards in the world were gunning for him. He knew that at least a few people, like your dad, James, would never stop until every last Horcrux was destroyed and every shred of Voldemort was killed. Hiding one last little bit of his soul in some anonymous new baby was sort of genius. I mean, you saw the way Voldemort looked. It wasn't like he could pass himself off unnoticed in a crowd, was it? But if he was part of some little kid, who would ever think to look there? It's the perfect disguise."

"But even so, he wouldn't be that little kid," Rose said, screwing her face up in disgust. "That little bit of his soul would have to compete against the whole soul of the person it was inside of."

"Or work with it," Scorpius said. "If it could find some weak place in the host soul, it could exploit it, somehow bend it to Voldemort's will. Even a tree can be bent if it's manipulated from the time it's a seedling. Voldemort was very patient and wily. His essence would take the time to prune and bend that new soul to his will."

"So what happened to the dagger?" Rose asked, seating herself on a crate. "We have to assume that Professor Snape was killed before he got a chance to destroy the Horcrux. But did he succeed in hexing the dagger to fool your grandfather?"

"Not according to him," Scorpius said, smiling grimly. "My grandfather knows nothing of the Pensieve or the memories it contains. He tells the entire story rather differently, of course…"

Scorpius launched into the rest of the tale as he knew it.

It began, he explained, with the death of Severus Snape at the hand of Voldemort, killed not because the Dark Lord suspected his divided allegiance—Scorpius himself hadn't even known of that until he'd discovered it in the Pensieve's stored memories—but because of the mistaken notion that Snape must die for the Elder Wand, the unbeatable instrument of magic, to belong fully to Voldemort. Snape had not expected this, and thus had not destroyed the dagger Horcrux. Snape had, however, been wily enough to hide the dagger extremely well, and to tell no one of its location. Shortly thereafter, after Voldemort himself had been killed and his Death Eaters scattered, Lucius Malfoy had gone after the dagger Horcrux, fanatically intent on fulfilling his duties to his dead master. He crept into the school shortly after the battle was over, while its defences were still very weak. He used every art at his disposal to search for the dagger, but even though he could sense its presence, he was utterly unable to find its hiding place. It drove him mad with fear and rage, for he believed that if he failed, the Dark Lord would exact his revenge even from beyond the grave.

While he was still searching Snape's Headmaster office, Lucius' presence in the castle was detected.

He fled, masked and cursing everyone and everything in his way. As he escaped through the Forbidden Forest, however, his heightened sensitivities detected a powerful magical object lost there. He had no time to search for the object, but he determined to return as soon as he could, for he believed he had quite by accident stumbled upon the hiding place of the dagger Horcrux.

Time passed, however, and Lucius was unable to return to the Forest. Most of his fellow Death Eaters were in hiding or had already been captured and imprisoned. Lucius covered his tracks exceptionally well, but lived in abject fear that he was being watched, that at any moment, he would be found out and apprehended. His wife, Narcissa, had left him shortly after the battle, and even his son, Draco, seemed to want little to do with him, so Lucius went into hiding. He used the last of his money to buy a rundown manor house on Cannery Row, protecting it with the best secrecy methods he knew. There, alone, he began to plan his return to Hogwarts castle to capture back the dagger.

Unfortunately, in the time that had passed, Hogwarts had been rebuilt and fortified. There was no way for someone like Lucius to get inside the grounds undetected. He needed partners and he needed money. Soon enough, he encountered both in the form of Gregor Tyrannicus, a soft but hate-filled refugee from his own royal wizarding family in Romania. Gregor came with a small fortune in gold, granted to him by his father in an effort to assure he left quietly and never returned. Gregor was instantly enthralled by Lucius' tales of his dealings with the famous Dark Lord, and vowed every bit of his treasure in support of the search for the mysterious dagger Horcrux. In exchange, he merely asked for his own position of power once the predicted pureblood kingdom was instated. Lucius graciously accepted Gregor's support, even catering to the man's rather obsessive infatuation with collecting relics from the Dark Lord's life.

Together, they assembled a small team of thieves and murderers, training them for the death-defying siege of Hogwarts castle. In reality, Lucius had no intention of accompanying the siege. He planned to use the distraction created by the siege to sneak alone into the Forbidden Forest and seek out the hidden dagger. Despite his and Gregor's training, in fact, Lucius fully expected the siege team to be captured and sent to Azkaban. Frankly, so long as they provided the short distraction Lucius needed, he didn't care. They would be one small sacrifice in the ongoing work of the fallen Dark Lord.

The siege never happened though. Less than a week before the planned trip to Hogwarts castle, Lucius was alone in the manor house on Cannery Row when one of the thieves he'd hired for the siege team, a young man named Malcolm Baddock, stepped out of the shadows, a knife glittering in his hand. The man grinned, ordering Lucius to turn over the gold hidden somewhere in the house.

"Give it to me and maybe I'll only cut out your tongue, old man," Baddock had said.

Lucius had merely sighed. He closed the book he'd been reading and, almost lazily, produced his wand. He fingered it idly, not really pointing it at Baddock. "And what makes you believe, young man, that you won't be killed where you stand by this very wand?"

Baddock's grin widened eagerly. "Because this here's my lucky knife, it is," he said, displaying the darkly glinting blade. "It's not failed me yet. It'll kill you three times before you hit the floor, you daft

old coot. No wand's ever been any good against it before, and yours won't be any different. Now take me to the gold!"

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "Tell me, my friend," he said silkily, "does your lucky knife know when a wizard is going to do this?"

In one deft movement, Lucius drew a short flick in the air. A thin red line slashed across Baddock's throat and he flinched. Blood began to bead from the cut. It dribbled down his throat and Baddock tried to look down at it, frowning rather comically. His face contorted with rage and he reared, hoisting the knife by its tip. As he opened his mouth to speak, however, his head quietly toppled backwards off his shoulders, separating neatly along the line of blood. It fell to the floor with a thunk.

Lucius was already pocketing his wand and wondering if he'd tell the rest of the team what had happened to Baddock when something poked him in the stomach. He looked down curiously and noticed the hilt of Baddock's knife protruding from his robe. A moment later, he heard the thump of the man's headless body striking the floor, dead. Truly, it had been a lucky knife if Baddock had succeeded in finishing the throw he'd begun while his head was still marginally attached.

Lucius reached for the knife to extract it from his stomach. It would hurt, but it wouldn't be fatal, not to a wizard like Lucius. He stopped, however, before his fingers touched the hilt. His eyes widened slowly as he stared at it. The bit of hilt he could see protruding from the slowly darkening folds of his robes was quite ugly and jewel-encrusted. Lucius recognized it. Slowly, he wrapped his fingers around the silver hilt and pulled the blade out of his gut. He barely felt it. He slid to his knees, holding the dagger up, turning it, and watching the firelight play on its dark, bloody blade. He began to laugh.

"Thank you, my Lord," he cried through his laughter. "Even dead, your word rings true! Your final Horcrux has found me! Thank you! I will not fail you! Your final task will be completed!"

Lucius laughed until he was hoarse, only remembering to heal the wound in his stomach when he noticed the blood soaking the front of his robes and pattering to the floor.

It had been over two years since the Battle of Hogwarts, since the inconceivable death of the Dark Lord, but Lucius was finally able to complete his duty. He told Gregor of the surprising appearance of the dagger, and they dismissed the rest of the siege team with a small pay-off in gold, warning them that if they told anyone what they knew, they would experience the same fate as had befallen their mate, Baddock.

Lucius had long since determined the family that would play host to the Dark Lord's 'gift'. They were pureblood, but lowly and poor. Lucius spied on them and discovered that a young woman in the family had just become pregnant. Her name was Lianna Agnellis and her husband had recently been apprehended by the Ministry, suspected of low-level involvement with Death Eaters in the last days of Voldemort's reign of terror. Lucius had vaguely known the man, whose name was Wilfred. He had indeed been a tool of the Death Eaters, although he himself barely knew it. The young man had been

extremely simple and gullible, and Lucius himself had even used him as a messenger. It was Lucius who had anonymously informed the Ministry of Wilfred's Death Eater connections, knowing full well that the pathetic man would never be able to implicate anyone by name; Lucius and his cohorts had been far too careful for that. Wilfred was interrogated by the Wizengamot and eventually imprisoned in Azkaban until such time as he might choose to divulge the names of his purported accomplices.

After Wilfred's imprisonment, Lucius paid a visit to the young, quite pregnant Lianna in her tiny flat. He ingratiated himself to her, claiming to be a concerned friend and former associate of her incarcerated husband. Lianna made tea for the two of them and they sat at her rickety kitchen table. Lucius explained that he had both the money and the influence to see to her husband's release if she was willing to perform a small service on behalf of her husband's benefactors. Lianna was desperate: she fell upon Lucius, sobbing and promising she'd do anything to get her Wilfred back home. She asked what Lucius required of her, and he balked, suggesting that she might think twice once he told her. He asked her to take a moment to consider it while she refilled his tea.

As she returned to the stove, sniffing and wiping her eyes, Lucius peered into Lianna's empty teacup, examining the shreds of tea leaves scattered in the bottom. He had to be sure that the child in the woman's womb was a boy child; surely, Lucius was wizard enough to ascertain something as simple as that. He looked closely, squinting, but for some reason, the tea leaves blurred before his eyes. He blinked, trying to focus, to concentrate. In his robes, the Horcrux dagger seemed to vibrate. He felt it reaching into his mind, calling him. It was distracting him. Lately, Lucius never went anywhere without the dagger, but now he suddenly wished he'd left it at the manor house. And then, just as Lianna was returning, settling Lucius' own cup onto the table, the strew of sodden leaves became clear. Lucius stared at them, even reaching for the woman's cup and tilting it to the light. Yes, there it was. There was no question: the child in the woman's belly was a boy child. The leaves proved it. Lucius sighed and smiled with relief. The dagger in his robes went still again.

"What?" Lianna had said nervously, sitting back down. "What do you see in the leaves? Am I going to get my Wilfred back?"

Lucius looked at her with gently shining eyes. He placed his hand on hers comfortingly. "You will both be together very soon," he promised, "if you do as we require. You may do it today, this very afternoon if you wish. I will assist you. But you must do it with no hesitation and no questions. It may shock you and even pain you, but only a little, and it will be over in mere minutes. Can you do that, my dear Mrs. Agnellis?"

She nodded, nervously but with great resolution. "I knew that Wilfred's bosses weren't the nicest of people, and that the things they made him do were sometimes awful. I told him then what I'm telling you now, sir: I don't want to know anything about it. I'll do what you want me to do, but don't make me know any more about it than I have to. I just want my Wilfred back, and after that, we'll take our leave of the lot of you, if you don't mind."

Lucius nodded understandingly, patting her hand, but Lianna seemed to have nothing more to say. The firm line of her mouth proved to Lucius that the simple-minded woman had determined to do nearly

anything to get her husband back. She seemed to sense it would be rather horrid, but she had a look on her face that Lucius knew well. It was the look that said I will do whatever it takes, and then I will never speak of it or think of it again. No one will know, and I will forget it myself. I am already forgetting it. My mind is a blank. Please just get it over with.

When Lucius was quite confident that the look of resolve was fully solidified on Lianna's face, he reached slowly into his robe, maintaining his expression of kind concern. He produced a folded black cloth and laid it on the table.

"Unwrap it, Mrs. Agnellis," he said quietly. "It is for you."

She reached and pulled the folded cloth to herself. She unwrapped it and stared blankly down at the ugly silver dagger.

Lucius continued to smile at her. "It'll only hurt for a moment," he said reassuringly. He began to explain to her what she must do.

"That's absolutely horrible," Rose said, her voice shaking. "Your grandfather is a monster!"

Scorpius didn't respond. He looked away, glancing at the dusty Mirror of Erised.

Ralph frowned. "So how did that Baddock bloke get the dagger Horcrux?"

"He was a seventh-year student at Hogwarts right before the battle," Scorpius said. "My grandfather thinks the dagger somehow allowed Baddock to find it, knowing it could use him to get to where it wanted to be."

"Poor stupid git," Rose said, sighing.

"But if the dagger was with Baddock," James asked, "then what was the magical object your grandfather sensed in the Forbidden Forest—" He stopped suddenly as the answer came to him. Rose's eyes widened as she also made the connection.

"The Resurrection Stone!" she breathed. "That's how they found it! He got lucky enough to get near it when his senses were on high alert! He felt the lost Resurrection Stone and mistook it for the hidden dagger!"

"He must have realized that as well," James nodded gravely. "He probably didn't know what it was, but after Baddock tried to attack him, he knew the thing in the Forest couldn't have been the dagger.

Eventually, he snuck out into the Forest to look for it. Bloody hell! He must have wet himself when he found out it was Slytherin's half of the Beacon Stone!"

Scorpius shook his head. "I don't know anything about that part, but yes, it would make sense."

"So," James asked, "that's the end of the story, then? This poor Lianna woman scratched Voldemort's initial on her belly and gave birth to a baby with part of Voldemort's soul in it?"

Scorpius nodded, still averting his eyes, "She was sick with what she'd done, and of course, my grandfather did nothing to see that her husband was released from Azkaban. Not that he really could even if he'd wanted to. All of that had been lies. Eventually, as Wilfred wasn't released, Lianna became convinced that she'd done something awful, and for no reason. She became very sick and was taken to St. Mungo's hospital. That night, she died giving birth to her baby."

Ralph's lips were pressed into a thin line. He shook his head and said, "This is awful. I didn't need to know any of this."

Rose looked up, her eyes shining. "Whatever happened to the baby's father?"

"Wilfred stayed in Azkaban for years. He knew his wife had died giving birth to his child, but he never saw the baby. He demanded to be let out so he could raise his child. He became irrational and was put into solitary confinement. A short while later, he was found dead in his cell. My grandfather believes he was thrown into the Dementor pit by some of the guards."

"The 'Dementor pit'?" Ralph said, shuddering.

Rose sighed shallowly. "The Dementors used to be the guards at Azkaban. When they were deemed untrustworthy, most of them were rounded up and imprisoned there themselves, in a virtually lightless room in the cellar. Just like with the Borleys, the Dementors are creatures of shadow: without light to show up against, they're helpless. Azkaban's dark pit keeps them imprisoned and weak but mad with hunger. If a human was thrown into the pit with them, it'd be an extremely horrible death."

Ralph asked, "But why would the guards throw that poor sap into the pit?"

"Revenge," Scorpius said simply. "They believed he was holding out, protecting the worst Death Eaters, the ones who hadn't yet been captured. Most of the new guards at Azkaban had been former Aurors and Harriers. They'd seen loads of people killed by the Death Eaters and had no mercy on someone they believed was protecting those responsible. Nothing was ever proved though."

"So the baby was an orphan," James said quietly. "Just like my dad."

Scorpius nodded. "To my grandfather's great anger, the baby was a girl child. To this day, he has no idea that it was the hex of Severus Snape that clouded his judgment, working through the dagger itself. He refuses to refer to the child as a 'she', calling it either 'the Bloodline' or even 'it'. He simultaneously despises her and obsesses over her, knowing she bears the last shred of his dead

master. The baby girl was raised by Lianna's parents, who were not particularly loving. My grandfather has spied on them regularly through the years. The grandparents were never overtly cruel, but Grandfather believes they secretly blame the girl for the death of their daughter."

Rose shook her head. "Stop. I don't want to hear any more. It's just too beastly."

James face had grown hard and resolved. He looked at Scorpius. "No," he said. "You've told us everything else. Now tell us the most important part. Tell us who the Bloodline is."

"I'd thought you would have figured that bit out by now," Scorpius answered. "She is the only known orphan girl currently at Hogwarts, although she never speaks of it. She has her mother's dark hair and her father's height, but everything else, she gets from the persistent dark influence of the dagger Horcrux, from the last fragmented wisp of the soul of Voldemort. She was standing right next to you this afternoon, hidden behind a bookshelf in the library, listening to you three. It was her presence that set off the Sneakoscope in Ralph's satchel. You know who I mean. Tell me her name because I can't bring myself to say it out loud. My grandfather would kill me, and he'd probably use that stupid dagger to do it."

James looked at Rose and Ralph, measuring their faces, and then he looked at Scorpius.

"The Bloodline of Voldemort is Tabitha Violetus Corsica," he said firmly. "Somehow, I've known it all along."

"Then you know something else as well," Scorpius said, sighing and standing up.

"What?" Ralph said, looking one by one at everyone in the room.

Rose answered calmly, "We know who Bloodline is, so we also know who the host of the Gatekeeper is going to be. Both are Tabitha."

James shook his head slowly. "The only thing we don't know," he said, "is how and when it's going to happen and what we can do to stop her."

18. The Triumvirate

Last year, during a rather harrowing adventure in the Forbidden Forest, James had met something called a 'dryad', a living spirit of a tree. The dryad had been quite beautiful, in a sort of sad, hypnotic way, and she had warned James that the blood of his father's greatest enemy beat in a new heart, not one mile hence. The dryad had also said that James should beware: your father's battle is over, she'd told him, *yours begins*.

James hadn't known what the dryad meant by that, but he'd had a nagging idea of who the Bloodline of Voldemort was. He'd suspected Tabitha Corsica all along, even though others had told him she was simply a smart, rather devious girl with some nasty delusions about recent history. Now that James knew that Tabitha was, in fact, the Bloodline of which the dryad had warned, he felt increasingly helpless. There was nothing he could do to stop Tabitha's plan, mostly because he didn't know what the plan entailed. Scorpius insisted that his grandfather had never told him the specifics of how the Bloodline was to become the Gatekeeper's host apart from it being a test that would prove Tabitha's willingness and commitment to the Gatekeeper's purpose. James would have liked to ask Merlin about it, but his latest interview with the Headmaster had only increased his worries and fears about the great sorcerer. Similarly, James might have written a letter to his dad explaining everything and asking for his help, but his dad already had his hands full with the sale of the Burrow, providing living arrangements for Grandma Weasley, and heading up the new sub-department for quelling the mysterious Dementor uprisings in London. Besides, in his last letter, James' dad had admitted that they believed the whole Gatekeeper affair was a complicated ruse created by enemies of the Ministry to sow fear and instability. How could James ask his dad for help fending off something that his dad believed was imaginary? More and more, James found himself thinking of the dryad's last words: this wasn't Harry Potter's battle; it was James'.

Scorpius had suggested that the best they could do was to simply watch Tabitha as closely as possible, a task that was increasingly difficult as the end of the term neared. James saw her regularly during rehearsals for The Triumvirate since Tabitha was the assistant director and increasingly in charge of the rehearsals while Professor Curry attended to final production planning. Tabitha's malicious critiques of James' performances had not let up. If anything, she was even harder on him, always apologizing for making him repeat his lines in front of the rest of the cast, as if she was trying to assume polite responsibility for his apparently woeful performance. "After all," James had heard Tabitha saying quietly to Professor Curry, "I did consent to his receiving the role along with the rest

of the casting committee. Nevertheless, hindsight is always clearest, as they say…"

The main task of observing Tabitha fell to Ralph since he shared the same house as her. Apart from the same general moodiness, however, Ralph couldn't report anything unusual about Tabitha's conduct. To James, she seemed either vaguely impatient or even more ingratiatingly polite than ever.

Classes began to wind down as the final performance loomed. Loads of parents and family were travelling to attend the show, including James' mum and sister. His dad, much to his own disappointment, was needed in London for the first crackdown by the Dementor task force and therefore would not be able to attend the show. Ginny, however, had promised to record James' performance on a borrowed set of Omnioculars so that Harry could watch later. In light of the suspected large audience, Professor Curry's intention of conducting an entirely non-magical, Muggle-style production had been overshadowed by her students' increasing determination to put on a wholly sensational show. James had seen evidence of secret magical enhancement in nearly every aspect of the production, from the treadle-powered wind machine running mysteriously without anyone manning the treadles, to unplugged electrical spotlights that still glowed. In fact, since Hogwarts castle had no source of electrical power, several small Muggle generators had been delivered to the school to provide power for the lights. Even Professor Curry, however, had failed to realize that the generators needed a constant refill of petrol to run. In the interest of expediency, Damien had surreptitiously charmed the generators to emit an industrious chugging sound and, just for the look of it, plugged all the electrical cords into them. Professor Curry had wisely stopped asking after the generators and turned to more pressing matters.

Petra's class schedule seemed to consistently conflict with James' so that he rarely had the opportunity to rehearse with her on-stage. This was unfortunate, Professor Curry admitted, but not a great problem since Tabitha Corsica had arranged for an understudy to fill in for Petra whenever she couldn't attend rehearsals with James. Josephina Bartlett's vertigo had abated to the point where she could read through the lines on Petra's behalf, and having originally been awarded the part of Astra before her unfortunate 'accident', she was the logical choice to serve as Petra's stand-in. She did so with a kind of resigned fervor, caught between her embarrassment at having to serve as understudy and her desire to prove how much better an Astra she would have made. She lurked on the stage, arms folded and barely noticing any of the other actors, until Astra's lines came up. At that point, she would launch into her readings, switching from apathy to full melodrama in the mere blink of an eye, and then switching back to apathy the moment Astra's lines were completed. She barely seemed to notice James on the stage even though many of her lines were meant to be directed toward him. For her own part, Tabitha seemed pleased with Josephina's discomfiture, smiling smugly whenever her lines came up. James was especially annoyed to have to practice the climactic kissing scene with Josephina, especially since he'd never once rehearsed it with Petra herself.

"Don't you dare try to kiss me, you little upstart," Josephina muttered as she leaned in, smiling mistily.

"Wouldn't dream of it," James growled through his own loving smile. "Just try not to fall on me, all right? You're still looking rather tipsy."

He made sure to miss Josephina's lips by a wide mark. A moment later, the lights extinguished and Tabitha called for a ten-minute break while the stage crew refilled the rain machine.

That night, James had the dream one more time, although this time he felt that it was a true dream and not a direct vision into someone else's reality. It began as always with the flash and whicker of blades and the rattle of old wood. The figure in the dream walked toward the rippling pool and looked in. As always, two faces swam up out of the depths, a young man and a young woman. This time, however, they looked different. He recognized them vaguely as his own long dead grandparents, his dad's mum and dad. They didn't seem to be looking at the girl with the long dark hair. Instead, they seemed to be looking directly at James, where he floated in the darkness next to her. Their faces seemed grave and worried, and although they couldn't speak, they communicated with their eyes: Beware, grandson; watch closely and step lightly. Beware…

The dark-haired girl turned away from the faces in the pool, and James looked up at her. Even now that he knew she was Tabitha Corsica, her face remained lost in shadow. James tried to speak, to tell her not to hide any more, that there was no point, but his lips felt as if they were sewn shut. He moved along with her as she passed the pool, and as she moved, the dream changed. The mossy, dark walls faded into distance and were replaced by cold wind on a grassy hilltop. A huge full moon burned overhead, yellow and bloated, as if it meant to fall on him. The Tabitha shape continued to walk, and James saw that they were in a graveyard. A leaning wrought-iron fence marched drunkenly on the right, embracing a collection of worn headstones and crypts.

"I've never been here before," a young man's voice said. James looked and could just make out a tall silhouette walking next to the Tabitha shape. Tabitha herself seemed taller as well, and her voice was rather different when she spoke.

"Why would you have come here before?"

"My grandparents are buried here," the young man's voice said somberly. "I've no memory of visiting their graves."

"How sad for you," the Tabitha shape said.

"If you say so."

They came upon a glow in a hollow. It emanated from a lantern hooked onto a post. Near it, a stooped man was scooping earth from a grave. He straightened as they approached, surveying them with a cold, appraising look, as if he'd been expecting them.

"Whose grave is this?" the Tabitha shape asked.

The young man sighed, and suddenly James recognized who it was. "It is mine," Albus answered, turning to the Tabitha shape. James finally got a good look at him in the lantern glow. He looked about seventeen or eighteen, handsome but sallow, gaunt, as if he hadn't eaten in days. "You knew this day was coming," he said, removing his wand from his robes. "All sides have been chosen. He senses you

are here; he comes now, flying like the wind. But there is something you must do first."

And Albus handed the Tabitha shape his wand.

Even knowing this was a dream, James tried to cry out, to warn Albus, but his lips wouldn't obey him. He could do nothing but watch. The Tabitha shape raised Albus' wand, pointing it toward the sky. She sniffed, and her shoulders hitched as if she were crying. Then, without warning, there was a burst of green light and an awful hiss. The stooped man with the shovel looked up first, and then so did the Tabitha shape. Albus didn't raise his eyes. Finally, James found he could look up. Spreading overhead was a bright, shimmering shape. It was a huge green skull, its mouth open. Out of the skull's mouth poured a leering snake, its jaw unhinged and menacing. The eerie glow of the Dark Mark lit the entire graveyard. On one of the nearer headstones, James saw his and his sister's names. His blood chilled even though he knew these were the names of his dead grandparents.

There was a loud crack, and another figure appeared, wand already out and pointing.

"Stop!" the figure cried, and James thought the voice sounded oddly familiar. "Both of you! I know what you think you have to do, but it doesn't have to be this way! Albus, don't let it end like this!"

"Do it," Albus said, but James couldn't tell if he was speaking to the newcomer or the Tabitha shape.

"No!" the newcomer cried, and there was an edge of desperation in his voice. "The rest are coming, and they won't waste time on words! We only have a few seconds! Albus, don't be a fool!"

"I'm sorry," Albus said, still looking at the Tabitha shape. He nodded slowly to her. She lowered the wand, aiming it at him.

The newcomer stepped forward, crying the name of the Tabitha shape, appealing to her. "Please don't! This isn't who you really are!"

"You're right, James," the Tabitha shape said quietly, almost sadly. "As of tonight, I will be known by an entirely different name."

There was an ears-splitting cry and a blast of light, obliterating everything. James fell into that light, struggling to maintain the dream, but it broke apart like glass, like a scene glimpsed in a shattering mirror.

James woke up, panting and slick with sweat. He scrambled to a sitting position on his bed, his heart pounding. The phantom scar on his forehead throbbed so hard he thought it must split his skull open. He clapped a hand to it, hissing through his teeth. After a minute, the pain began to recede, but very slowly. When he could bring himself to do it, James turned to sit on the side of his bed. He opened his satchel in the darkness and rooted inside, searching for his quill and a bit of parchment. Finally, just as the sweat on his body began to cool in the midnight air of the dormitory, he leaned over his bedside table and scribbled three words. He stared at his own handwriting in the moonlight. It didn't make any sense. Probably it was meaningless. It had only been a dream, and not at all like the other

dreams his phantom scar had induced. But it had been wrong in some fundamental, very worrying way. For reasons he couldn't bring himself to admit, he felt that it was important to remember it.

Finally, now shivering, James folded himself back into his covers. He had no idea what time it was. Tomorrow was the official performance of *The Triumvirate,* and after that, the last week of school. Somewhere out there, perhaps not far away, the Gatekeeper was lurking, waiting for its human host. And here, inside the very same walls, was that host, preparing herself for the task that would make her worthy. And somehow, in some way, James was meant to stop it all from happening. Your father's battle is over, the dryad had said, yours begins. They were not comforting words, but they were the words that rang over and over in his head, following him as he descended, slowly, into a fitful, dreamless sleep.

Nearby, Scorpius Malfoy lay awake, watching, not speaking or moving. When he was certain that James had finally drifted back into sleep, he slid out of his own bed. Tiptoeing, he crossed the room, passing before the window and casting his shadow over James. Scorpius leaned over carefully, squinting. He didn't have his glasses, but the moonlight was very bright and Scorpius could just make out James' handwritten words. He scowled at them for a long time, unmoving in the moonlight. Finally, Scorpius made his way back to his own bed.

Unlike James, Scorpius did not sleep for the rest of the night.

"Today's the big day!" Noah proclaimed, plopping into a seat next to James at the breakfast table. "Eat up, 'Treus'. Can't have you fainting onstage, can we? After all, you don't have an understudy."

James groaned. The tables seemed unusually crowded this morning since some of the families planning to attend the performance had arrived the evening before. Ralph's dad, Denniston Dolohov, sat with him at the Slytherin table, smiling uncertainly at the noisome throng. Noah's own parents sat at the head of the Gryffindor table with Steven, his brother.

"Shouldn't you be sitting with your family?" James asked grumpily.

"Bad luck, mate," Noah said wisely, tapping the side of his nose. "None of the family are supposed to see you before the performance. S'tradition, isn't it?"

Sabrina shook her head, wobbling the quill that was stuck in her red hair. "You're thinking of weddings, you prat. Grooms and brides aren't supposed to see each other."

"Well, where do you think they got the idea?" Noah asked around a mouthful of toast. "After all,

what's a wedding but a big real-life performance?"

"You're not nervous, are you, James?" Sabrina asked, ignoring Noah.

"I might be, a little," James admitted. "I mean, I never expected we'd be packing out the amphitheater. A lot more people are coming than I thought. Seems like everybody's family is going to be here, doesn't it?"

"My mum's coming," Sabrina said, nodding. "And my Uncle Hastur. He went to Hogwarts himself about a hundred years ago and this will be his first time back."

Graham piped up, "Both my parents are coming even though I'm just a page boy. I only have one line, but they act like I'm the star of the whole show."

"I wish you were the star of the whole show," James said, slumping onto his folded arms.

"Does somebody have a spot of stage fright?" Rose asked brightly, settling into a seat opposite James.

"He's got it bad," Noah said, nudging James with his elbow. "At this rate, he'll be useless by the time the curtains go up. I might have to play both parts! Fortunately, I'm up to it."

"Treus and Donovan's swordfight might be a bit of a challenge," Graham suggested, squinting thoughtfully.

In an effort to change the subject, James asked, "Where's Petra this morning? Are her parents coming?"

"I saw her in the common room this morning," Noah answered. "Looked like she was working on her lines still. She was studying something pretty hard. I didn't interrupt her. I assume her family is coming, but she hasn't talked much about it."

"I asked her yesterday if her parents were coming," Sabrina nodded. "She said she'd be seeing them both tonight. It'll be cool to meet everybody's families, don't you think? The only other time we see them is on platform nine and three-quarters, and that's always so rushed."

"Yeah," Graham said, rolling his eyes. "Nothing I like more than getting my cheeks pinched by everybody else's grandma."

"If only your cheeks weren't so ruddy cute," Noah said, reaching across the table. Graham batted him away, scowling.

James found it difficult to concentrate on any of his classes. In fact, with so many parents and family members arriving throughout the day, few professors seemed to expect much from their classes at any rate. Regardless, James was glad of the distractions. He tried very hard to take notes during Divination despite the fact that Professor Trelawney seemed to frown on anything other than practical

demonstrations.

"Divination is an instinct, not a study, Mr. Potter," she trilled, stopping next to his desk and tapping his parchment with one long, purple fingernail. "Your work is to hone the latent ability inside the gifted witch and wizard, not merely to repeat techniques and theories. Let go of your boundaries and allow yourself to truly see, my boy. What fate do you divine for yourself in the octocards?"

James blinked up at Trelawney, then glanced down at the strew of octagonal cards on the table in front of him. "Oh, er, I see this one, which has a star on it," he said, pulling a card out at random. "Stars represent pain, and, er… Christmas. It means that I'm going to be run down by a lorry next holiday, but that I won't be killed, just really, really hurt," he looked up at Trelawney again, judging her response. "I'll probably die weeks later, in the hospital… er… right?"

Trelawney's face changed to a bemused smile and she ruffled his hair indulgently. "You are trying too hard, dear boy. You chose a star because that's what you shall be this night." Trelawney sighed mistily and drifted toward the front of the room. "Few people know it, but I was a rather gifted performer myself in my younger years. There are those today who still speak of my singing performance in the Hogsmeade Players production of The Amazing Ahazrial's Show of Shows. Alas, I submitted instead to the burdensome calling of Seer and teacher, thus curtailing my own storied career on the stage. I am fully assured, however, that your performance tonight, Mr. Potter, will be a delight both sublime and breathtaking. I have already foreseen it." She smiled back at James, her eyes magnified ridiculously in her enormous spectacles.

James glanced aside at Ralph, whose face was as pale and worried as James felt. Considering Professor Trelawney's track record with predictions, her assurances about tonight's performance were anything but comforting.

For the rest of the afternoon, James couldn't help reciting his lines over and over in his head. He was terrified that he would step onto the stage and completely forget every word. It didn't help that everyone seemed to think he should be enjoying the excitement. As he moved through the halls, even older students grinned and clapped him on the shoulder, wishing him good luck and telling him to 'break a wand'.

He saw his mum and sister fleetingly after dinner on his way to the amphitheater. They'd just arrived at the castle, having taken the train from London. Lily was wide-eyed, so enamored by the castle and the bustle of the students that she barely noticed her older brother. His mum, on the other hand, seemed almost impossibly proud of James.

"Oh, you've just become such a man," she said, brushing his shoulders and straightening his tie. "You'll be simply wonderful, James. You aren't nervous, are you?"

"Between people telling me how great I'm going to be and asking me if I'm nervous," James said, sighing, "I'm wondering why I ever signed up for this part to begin with."

Ginny clucked her tongue. "You signed up because you knew you could do it, and obviously,

everyone agrees. Now just try to relax. You won't do yourself any favors by worrying about it."

"Easy for you to say," James grumped.

"It is, actually," Ginny agreed, smiling at her son. "Because unlike the rest of the people here, I know *exactly* what you are capable of, James. Relax, you'll remember this night for the rest of your life. Try to enjoy the moment."

James nodded. "Did you bring the Omnioculars?"

"Your Uncle Ron has them," Ginny replied, rolling her eyes. "He insists on recording the play himself. I told him he could do it so long as he let Hermione help. They stopped over in Hogsmeade to meet up with George, Angelina, and Ted. They should be here in half an hour or so, and they're bringing a little surprise for you."

James had forgotten how many of his own family and friends were going to be in attendance. He felt another pang of nervous fear but quelled it. Truthfully, now that the moment was nearly upon him, he felt a little better about the performance. One way or another, it would be over soon. After the production, Professor Curry had arranged for something called a 'wrap party' in the Great Hall, complete with punch and an array of sweets. All the cast and crew would be there along with their families. It was a great relief to know that in less than three hours, James would be there as well, eating cake and congratulating Petra, Noah, and the rest on their completed performance. Thinking that, James left his mum and sister, telling them he'd see them afterwards. Ginny smiled and nodded, shooing him on.

The ushers outside the amphitheater's main entry saw James coming. Hugo Paulson, resplendent in his red coat and pillbox cap, opened a door for him. "Curry was looking for you," he said as James passed. "They want to get you into your beard right away. Gennifer insists she could charm you to grow a real one for the night, but Curry isn't going for it. Looks like it's glue and goat hair for you after all."

James nodded, hardly hearing Hugo. As he came into the amphitheater he stopped and looked down at the stage. It bustled with activity as the crew manhandled the castle backdrop into place and Professor Curry marched around, testing spotlights and calling for last-minute adjustments. On the stage, Petra glanced up and saw James. She smiled and waved him down. James smiled back, and for the first time he felt a thrill of delight untainted by fear at being part of such an elaborate production. He ran down the main aisle, taking the stairs two at a time.

"There's our Treus," Curry acknowledged as James climbed onto the stage. "Your costume is in the dressing room. Get into it and then get down to make-up, Mr. Potter. Your beard awaits."

James looked around, but there was no sign of Tabitha Corsica. She was probably backstage overseeing the costuming and make-up. He hoped he wouldn't see her as he ducked behind the castle backdrop, heading for the makeshift changing rooms.

The boys' dressing room was crowded with bustling characters struggling into tight-fitting coats, leotards, and baggy pantaloons. Cameron Creevey stopped James as he passed.

"Is this hat on right?" he asked, turning the strange headwear this way and that. "It's a five-corner hat, right? But what corner goes in front? Does it matter?"

"You'll have to ask Gennifer, Cam. I don't have the foggiest notion. Looks fine to me like it is."

"Gennifer's busy in the girls' changing room," Cameron fretted. "I just don't want to look like an idiot in front of everybody!"

Noah called over from the three-way mirror, "Honestly, I think you have it upside down, Cameron. Try flipping it over."

James stopped Cameron as the boy scrambled to invert his hat. "He's winding you up, Cam. Leave it alone."

"And you've got your cummerbund on all wrong," Noah added. "You're supposed to wear it over your bum like a diaper. See how Graham's wearing his?"

James rolled his eyes and took advantage of the overall confusion to slip past Cameron. Sure enough, he found his costume hung on a hook next to his locker. His name had been pinned to the front on a piece of parchment. The curtain wasn't scheduled to go up for nearly an hour, but James couldn't help feeling that he needed to hurry. He was buttoning the last of the many buttons of his vest when a voice spoke directly behind him, startling him badly.

"Hiya, James!" Zane chirped. "Can you give me a quick boost here?"

James turned, exasperated and bemused. "Zane! You have to stop popping up like that!" Impatiently, James produced his wand and shot a quick Stinging Hex at the blonde boy, who yelped in pain and dropped the huge bouquet of flowers he'd been holding.

"Yow!" Zane cried, clutching his bottom. "That really smarts! What was that for?"

"Zane?" James said, reaching out to touch his friend. "It's really you? I thought you were another mad Doppelganger message! What are you doing here?"

"Well, I was trying to reach that vase on the shelf there," Zane said, rolling his eyes. "But now I'm thinking I'll just leave this good luck bouquet right there on the floor, what do you say?"

"It really is you!" James said, struggling not to laugh. "I'm really sorry, mate! I thought you needed a magical boost like the other times. I really didn't mean to Sting you in the… but how'd you get here?"

Zane shrugged and grinned. "I got out of school day before yesterday. When I talked to your mum over the holidays, she asked if I'd like to ride along with them to see your big performance. How could I

turn it down? My parents agreed and I rode the Floo Network over to your place in London first thing this morning. How 'bout them apples?"

"That's excellent!" James exclaimed. "How long are you here for?"

"Rest of the week, if it's all right with old Merlin Magicpants. You two still on the outs?"

James opened his mouth to explain, then shook his head. "I don't know. It's complicated. Ask me after the show, all right?"

"You got it," Zane nodded. "I better get back out front. Your mum is saving me a place, but it's going to be standing room only, and some of those parents can get pretty cutthroat about seats. By the way, it's probably best if you don't get too close to the red flowers with the yellow tips. Those came from George, and he was grinning an awful lot about 'em."

James nodded seriously, glancing down at the bouquet on the floor. "Understood, thanks."

Damien Damascus pressed toward the boys, a prop sheep under one arm.

"James, come on!" he called. "Gennifer's going to have twin hinkypunks if you aren't wearing a goatee in five minutes. Hey, Zane, need a zap?"

"Nope, I'm good for the night," Zane said, patting his backside. "See you at the party, you guys!"

James scrambled after Damien, struggling to button the last of his buttons and already hot in his tights and waistcoat. After a moment, he stopped, ran back, and grabbed the enormous prop sword and scabbard. Clanking, he trotted to make-up, his stage fright mostly forgotten in the rush of simply getting ready and his happiness at seeing his friend.

Gennifer was holding James' goatee in her hands as he ran up and plopped into a chair.

"Honestly," she said, swabbing the beard with a foul-smelling, yellowish glue, "for the amount of trouble Muggles have to go through to put on a show like this, I'm surprised they do it at all."

"Maybe that's why they watch so much telly," Victoire commented from a nearby chair. "My mum says Muggle children spend more time in front of the telly than they do asleep."

Damien was still standing nearby. He sniffed, "But not as much time as Victoire spends in front of the mirror every day, so that's all right, then."

Victoire scoffed, ignoring the laughter that followed.

Five minutes later, James stood offstage alongside Petra, who looked beautiful, if a bit overstuffed, in her huge pink dress and curls. James peered carefully around the edge of the curtain. The amphitheater was indeed almost full, with loads more people still filing in, seeking seats, and babbling enthusiastically. James scanned the crowd, finally finding his mum in the middle section, ten

rows back. Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron sat on her right, apparently arguing over who was going to handle the Omnioculars. Ted Lupin sat next to Ron. He'd shortened his hair again, although it was still longer than it had been when he'd been in school last year. He looked much better than the last time James had seen him, although still slightly bedraggled. On Ginny's left, Lily sat up straight in her good yellow dress. She spied James and grinned, waving excitedly. James smiled back at her and waved surreptitiously, trying not to attract anyone else's attention. He placed a finger to his lips in a shushing gesture, and she nodded, pretending to zip her lips. As James watched, Zane sidled past a group of annoyed parents, heading toward the empty seat between George and Lily. Satisfied, James turned back to Petra and the assembling actors. Nearby, Scorpius was dressed in a soldier's outfit similar to James'. He didn't seem to be enjoying it.

"Nervous?" Petra asked quietly.

"Yeah," James nodded, "but excited, too. You?"

Petra turned to look out at the dark stage behind the curtain. She shook her head slowly. "Not any more. It'll all be over tonight, no matter what."

Jason Smith trotted out of the backstage darkness, his wand lit. "Anybody seen Corsica?" he whispered harshly, looking from face to face.

James shook his head. "She's not out front? She's supposed to be managing the ushers."

"None of you?" Jason asked, dismissing James. "Bloody hell."

As he stalked away again, muttering under his breath, Henrietta Littleby shrugged. "I saw her an hour ago, but that was before any of us were supposed to be here. I guess that doesn't count, does it?"

"Where was she?" James asked, turning to Henrietta.

"She was in the second-floor girls' bathroom," Henrietta replied. "I didn't hang around in there when I saw her. She gives me the heebies, she does."

James frowned, thinking.

Henrietta, whose reputation as a gossip was well-known, went on, "Strange thing was she wasn't really using the bathroom. At least not the way one normally uses it. She was just standing there looking at herself in one of the mirrors, talking. The first thing I thought was that she was practicing her lines, but then I remembered she doesn't have any lines, does she? She's the assistant director." Henrietta giggled.

"She was talking to herself?" James asked curiously. "What was she saying?"

Henrietta blinked at him. "How should I know? I didn't hang about long enough to notice. But it sounded kind of foreign now that I think about it. How weird is that? Pretty weird, if you ask me."

"Yeah," James nodded thoughtfully. "Weird."

Standing nearby, Scorpius narrowed his eyes.

"Places, everyone!" Curry suddenly rasped, approaching the gaggle of costumed students and making shooing motions. "Behind the curtain! Come now, it's almost time!"

James followed Petra as she ducked behind the curtain, moving to her opening mark. James found the little taped 'X' on the floor, marking his position for the beginning of act one. His heart was pounding, but he was no longer nervous. Somehow, he'd left his stage fright backstage. Now that he was standing up front, waiting for the curtain to rise, he simply felt excitement. It thrummed in his arms and legs like magic, and in that moment, he thought he understood why even Muggles went to all the trouble to put on productions like this. One could come to love this feeling if they weren't careful. He gulped and looked aside. Petra saw him and smiled a crooked smile, nodding once. Across the stage, Noah and the rest of the actors shuffled nervously into place, lost in semi-darkness behind the huge, thick curtain. Through it, James could still hear the babble of hundreds of voices. Then, finally, there was the clack of Professor Curry's heels crossing the stage on the other side of the curtain. A spotlight clicked on, framing her; James could see her shadow on the backside of the curtains, caged in the center of a perfect circle of light. The crowd fell silent and a round of polite applause wafted into the air. It sounded eerily close. Curry held up her hands and nodded.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," she said loudly and clearly, not using her wand to amplify her voice, "and thank you as well for being here tonight. I know that many of you have come from quite far away, and on behalf of the students who've worked so hard to prepare tonight's production, many thanks indeed. My name is Tina Grenadine Curry, and as many of you know, I am Hogwarts' Professor of Muggle Studies. I believe tonight's presentation will be particularly interesting, not only because this is such a classic tale of the wizarding world, but because, as a term-long exercise for my Muggle Studies class, this production shall be presented in an entirely non-magical fashion. As such, prepare to be amazed, amused, and delighted, my friends, by the extremely creative and unconventional methods we've implemented to portray this beloved story. And now, ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, may I present your sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends and family, as they depict for you this Hogwarts Muggle Studies rendition of… *The Triumvirate!"*

Applause rang out again, deafeningly this time, as Damien Damascus and Ralph began to hoist the curtains. Jerkily, the red velvet rose, and as it did, the applause grew louder. Spotlights came on, picking out the revealed stage elements. One of them glared on James, blinding him temporarily and hiding the audience. He struggled not to squint, remaining perfectly still until the curtain was entirely raised. And then, finally, as the applause diminished into silence, the scene on the stage launched into motion. Everyone moved at once, bustling and passing one another, forming a passable representation of a busy medieval square. And then, exactly as planned, Noah's voice cried out, articulating his lines with meticulous care and volume.

"Tis fine a day t' appraise the troops, my king," he blared, stalking across the stage next to Tom Squallus, who had a pillow stuffed into his vest, creating a fat belly over his skinny legs.

"Indeed," Squallus bellowed, turning and jamming his hands onto his hips. "And more the better time to ease my daughter's wonderment for the peasant life. But look, my Astra comes!"

And Petra moved into view, stepping out from behind a painted wooden rampart and into the light of a gold-tinted spotlight. James didn't have to act as if he was astonished at how beautiful she looked. She smiled fleetingly at the fat king, and then turned to James, allowing her smile to grow more genuine. The crowd tittered and began to applaud again. Many of them knew this scene well, and knew its significance; this was the moment that the princess first spied the army captain with whom she'd soon fall in love. James, on his cue, stepped out of the line of soldiers and bowed over one outstretched leg, doffing his cap grandly. The applause was delighted and amused, and James suddenly decided that acting was a lot easier than he had expected.

Act one proceeded with nearly effortless speed and ease. James found his lines coming easily to his tongue, and he pronounced them loudly and carefully, always being aware to face the audience and keep his chin up. During Donovan's famous address to the troops, James allowed his eye to wander out over the crowd. He could barely see through the glare of the spotlights, but he could just make out the delighted smile and straight posture of his mum, the grim concentration of Lily as she tried to follow the story, and the crooked half-frown of Zane.

During the scene change for act two, James was hastily stripped of his waistcoat and given a sailor's kerchief. As he moved onstage, preparing to give his rousing—and very well-known—rallying speech, he saw Graham and Jason Smith manning the treadles of the wind machine. He launched into the speech, trying to summon the same anger and determination he'd felt when auditioning for the part early in the term.

"Wizards and men, forth draw ye wands and wits," he cried, unbuckling his scabbard and letting it fall to the floor. He produced the oversized prop wand and raised it. "To fight the violent seas this night, that by the morn we'll hold our win, or lie in beds of ocean sand: our beaten glory's shrine!"

Just offstage, Graham and Jason treadled furiously as the crowd burst into applause and even a few hoots and whistles. The prop sail flapped in the increasing mechanical wind as if in the teeth of an oncoming storm, and the enormous painted backdrop trundled aside, revealing an angry cloudscape painted with blues and purples.

The presentation marched on with its own strange inertia, bowling over the myriad little bumbles, forgotten lines, and missed cues that Professor Curry had promised would happen—and assured them the audience would barely notice. Graham appeared onstage for his scene, his face beet red and his eyes as round as plates. He'd been so worried about missing the cue for his only line that he interrupted the line before it, answering the question that hadn't even been asked yet. Tom Squallus sputtered, trying to make sense of his own scripted response, as Graham grinned in relief, looking out at the audience and struggling not to wave at his parents. A bit later, Ashley Doone performed such an enthusiastic presentation of the Marsh Hag that James heard children crying in the audience. And then, during the magical sword fight between Treus and Donovan, which was performed in midair while suspended from a complicated system of ropes and pulleys, James' sword was accidentally knocked

from his hand during a particularly enthusiastic parry. It clanked to the floor and both James and Noah stared down at it dumbly for a moment. Then James, in a fit of inspiration, furiously unbuckled his scabbard and waved it triumphantly over his head. Noah grinned and they finished the swordfight clanging sword to scabbard as the crowd laughed and cheered.

Finally, the climactic finale of act three was upon them. The king was dead, Donovan was defeated, and Treus, mortally wounded but clinging to life, had rescued Astra from the vengeful sleeping potion of the Marsh Hag. The castle had been struck by lightning and was crumbling into flames as a magical storm beat upon it, and James felt pretty sure that he knew now why this story was known as a tragedy. He limped across the stage, leading Petra toward the huge prop gate. The gate shook back and forth as Ralph and Sabrina stood behind it, rocking it with all their strength. Jason and Graham had once again manned the wind machine, billowing the castle's banners with a good imitation of a magical gale; swinging orange spotlights mimed the effect of raging flames and lightning. James stumbled dramatically as he led his beloved Astra toward the gate.

"Advance! We're nearly free," Petra cried, dropping to one knee next to James, as if imploring him. "The castle's doomed, but hope prevails! O Treus, curse it not!"

James was sweating under his costume, and it gave his face a fittingly dramatic sheen in the flashing lights. He smiled weakly at Petra and reached for her face. "I curse not hope," he said, and then coughed. "I've braved the tempest's watery wrath and fell that sorc'rer's might. I've cursed them all to gaze upon your loving face, but hope? What life I've left, I live in barricades of hope. Though God Himself may shake this world to fall upon itself, my love and hope remain. Depart my dear and leave me now: I walk to death in peace!"

"Pray no, beloved!" Petra cried, and even James was impressed by the mixture of anger and desperation she put into those three words. "For months and years I've longed for thee alone: my dreams, the home of thy desperate love! I'll not depart my place at body's side, lest unrequited dreams shall crush my soul!"

"Then give me now a testament to love," James said firmly, struggling to his feet and pulling Petra with him. "A kiss to cure the pains of death, this one to stand for all!"

Petra hesitated, her eyes shining with emotion, and James was impressed with her acting. For a fleeting moment, he was quite glad that they had never rehearsed this scene together, for he felt sure that the spontaneous chemistry of this moment could only happen once. Petra leaned toward him, still holding his right hand. She closed her eyes as the lights began to dim and the wind machine cranked up to full power, streaming through her long hair. And then, as James closed his eyes, not even remembering to miss Petra's lips, a bolt of blinding pain sank into his forehead. It burned through his phantom scar worse than anything he'd felt so far, and he stumbled, yanking his hand from Petra's to clap it to his forehead. The lights blinked off and the stage fell into pitch darkness.

The wind machine hadn't stopped however. In fact, it seemed to be far stronger than James had ever felt it. It pushed him as he reeled, and he fell to the floor in the darkness, his right hand still clamped

to his forehead. There was a long, ominous creak and then a resounding crash. Dimly, James understood that the wind machine had blown over the gate prop and that it had just missed him.

"Petra!" he shouted, struggling to get up. There was movement all over the stage, and even now, the wind machine hadn't stopped running. Something was very wrong. Wands were lit on the stage, and James had a sense of stage-hands rushing about, struggling to keep the rest of the set from blowing over. He scrambled to his knees, trying to make sense of what was happening.

"Shut it down!" someone rasped desperately.

"I can't! It's running by itself!"

"It's shaking apart! Look out!"

Suddenly, spotlights illuminated the stage again, blinding James. At that same moment, the wind machine produced a loud screech and rattle. One of the fan blades wrenched free and spun through the air, slamming into the turret backdrop. Off balance, the machine shook violently and tilted over. Stage-hands scattered as it loomed slowly and crashed to the stage floor where it finally clanked to a halt.

Amazingly, no one seemed to have been hurt. James spun on the spot, looking for Petra. As he'd suspected, the enormous prop gate had fallen at his feet. For a moment, James was sure that Petra was beneath it. He dropped to his knees but could find no sign of her. She must have fallen safely on the other side.

The house lights came up as Professor Curry rushed out on stage. The audience was babbling with alarm. Many people had stood, peering anxiously at the stage and calling the names of their children and relatives.

"Please, calm down," Professor Curry called, but her voice was lost in the rising chaos. "No one is hurt! Do return to your seats, everything is under control—"

A woman's scream pierced the amphitheater, and James gasped. The crowd fell silent as everyone looked to the source of the scream. James, from his vantage point on the stage, was among the first to see, and his blood chilled.

Ginny looked down at the empty seat next to her, her eyes wild and stunned. "She's gone!" she cried desperately, trying not to panic. "Lily's gone! Where'd she go! She was here just a moment ago! Where's my daughter?!"

Zane stared down at the empty seat between him and Ginny. He glanced up at James, making eye contact, and then ducked down. He reappeared a second later holding a pair of small yellow shoes. His eyes were deadly serious as he held them up. Something had taken Lily, taken her right out of the amphitheater in that moment of dark chaos. Ginny took the shoes from Zane and looked around, her eyes pleading.

"Lilyyyy!" she suddenly shrieked, her voice cracking. As if on cue, the audience exploded into frantic motion, scrambling for the exits, rushing the stage, calling names and babbling raucously.

James darted offstage, stripping his costume coat off as he went. In the confusing backstage darkness, he could just see the doorway that led out to the seating area. He had to get to his mum and find out what had happened. He angled toward the door, but something moved out of the darkness, blocking him. James looked up, scrambling to a halt, almost running into the large, dark shape.

"Come with me, boy," a voice rumbled, and a very strong hand clamped onto James' shoulder. Instinctively, James pulled away, but the hand held him firm.

"Let me go!" James exclaimed, anger and panic mingled in his voice.

"You must come with me," Merlin answered, his voice low and calm. "The Gatekeeper is afoot, James Potter, and it seeks you."

"No!" James cried, and pulled away with all his might. He wrenched loose from Merlin's grip and struggled to produce his wand. Merlin stepped after him, and James saw that he had his staff with him. There was no fighting the Headmaster. Without thinking, he ducked and leapt under Merlin's arm.

"James!" Merlin roared after him, but James refused to listen. He threw himself through the doorway and fell into the crowd, bowling several people over.

"Mum!" he called, climbing onto a seat and scanning the crowd. "Mum!"

A hand tugged at James' sleeve and he lunged away, toppling off the seat and landing on a large figure, who grunted.

"Ow! You're heavier than you look!" the figure bawled, struggling out from beneath him.

"Ralph!" James cried, getting up. "What's happening?"

Zane appeared next to Ralph, helping them both to their feet. "We have to get out of here," he said over the noise of the crowd. "This place is a mess, and we know Lily isn't here. Rose is waiting for us just inside the castle. Come on!"

"Where's Mum?" James called as the three threaded through the crowd.

"Your Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione took her inside as well," Zane answered. "George and Ted are already planning to search the castle. Since it's impossible to Disapparate from the school grounds, Lily must still be here somewhere."

Ralph's face was tense with anger. "Who did this? Do you think this is what Corsica's been planning? Does it have to do with the Gatekeeper?"

"It's the only thing that makes sense," James replied as the three ran through the archway leading into

the castle. Rose had been watching for them. She jumped forward to join them, her face pale and scared. Panting, James took a moment to tell them of his encounter with Merlin.

"He said the Gatekeeper was looking for you?" Rose asked. "What's that mean? Why?"

James shook his head. "Who knows? The point is, he knows something big is going down tonight. He wanted me out of the way!"

"Nobody has seen Tabitha all night," Ralph interjected. "She never showed up for the play. Curry was right mad about it. She must be behind Lily's disappearance!"

"She's involved, no doubt," a new voice answered. James turned to see Scorpius approaching, his face tight and anxious. He shook his head. "Look, this isn't how Grandfather said it'd happen… it's all wrong. I came to help, if I could."

Rose spoke up, "You said your grandfather never told you how Tabitha was supposed to become the host of the Gatekeeper!"

"Yeah," Scorpius said quickly, meeting Rose's eye. "Well, I know a little more than I let on, all right? I can explain now or we can start looking for James' sister. What do you think, Weasley?"

"What else haven't you told us?" James demanded, advancing on Scorpius.

Scorpius averted his eyes impatiently. "Look, all I know is that this isn't how the plan was explained to me. I don't know the details, but I do know this is all wrong. The longer we stand here arguing, the more danger your sister is in. Do you understand?"

James narrowed his eyes.

"You must be Scorpius," Zane interjected, sticking out his hand. "I've heard loads about you. I'm Zane. I may have to curse you later, so I thought it'd be best to get introductions out of the way now."

Ralph rolled his eyes impatiently. "Come on! Let's just go to the Great Hall! That's where your mum went with everyone else. We can help with the search party."

"No," James said, still looking at Scorpius. "There's only one place we need to look, isn't there? Second-floor girls' bathroom, where Henrietta last saw Tabitha."

Rose frowned. "Why would she be there?"

"I wondered the same thing when Henrietta said that," James replied, already leading the way down the corridor. "But then I remembered: that's where Moaning Myrtle lives."

"'Moaning Myrtle?'" Zane repeated. "Who's she?"

"Oh, she's a resident ghost," Rose replied. "Lives in the bathroom because that's where she was killed

decades ago."

Zane screwed up his face as he walked. "She died in the potty? That seems pretty unlikely, doesn't it?"

"It's complicated," Rose answered wearily. "It wasn't just a bathroom. It was also a portal to… to…" Rose gasped. "James, that's it!"

James glanced back over his shoulder, nodding. "Henrietta said Tabitha was up there talking to herself in the mirror, using some sort of foreign language."

Rose's eyes were wide. "Of *course!* The Bloodline would be a Parselmouth, just like Voldemort! She'd be able to open the Chamber of Secrets even though it's been closed and sealed all these years! That must be where she took Lily!"

"I've been seeing it in my dreams all along," James said. "If only I'd have recognized it before!"

"Hey!" a voice suddenly called, halting the five in their tracks. James spun, expecting Merlin to come striding out of the shadows, his staff at the ready. Instead, two figures ran out of the darkness, one small and skinny and the other tall and bedraggled.

"Albus!" Rose cried. "Ted! Is it you?"

"Yeah," Ted panted. "Your mum sent me, James. She's worried sick about the lot of you."

"And I came mainly because I sneaked away when Mum wasn't looking," Albus proclaimed. "I couldn't bear just sitting around and doing nothing."

"Ted, how'd you find us?" Zane asked, frowning.

Ted blew out a deep sigh. "I have skills…" He tapped his nose. "Werewolf skills, if you must know. Between Rose's soap and the peppermints in Ralph's pocket, you lot are easier to sniff out than a dead Grindylow."

"Tell Mum we're going to find Lily," James said, straightening. "We know where she is and who has her."

"Do you now?" Ted replied seriously. "That's pretty amazing considering your aunt and uncles are currently scouring the entire castle for her. What gives?"

"It's too much to explain," Rose said. "Just pass on the message. We're going to go get her back."

"Nothing doing," Albus said, shaking his head. "She's my sister too. If you know where she is, I'm coming along."

"Albus, it's Corsica who has her!" James exclaimed.

"Tabitha Corsica took Lily?" Ted interjected. "Why would she do that? Are you sure?"

"We're sure," Ralph answered, nodding. "And we don't have much time."

"What are we waiting for, then?" Albus said grimly. "I don't care who has her. We'll figure out the details after we get her back, all right? Come on!"

The group tramped along the corridor, now running full out. As they filed up the stairs, James heard Ted behind him, speaking in short bursts.

"I'm sorry, Ralph… about the whole trying-to-rip-your-arm-off thing…"

"S'okay," Ralph panted. "Don't mention it…"

"I was angry…" Ted went on, "Petra and me… when we talked that day… it just brought everything back… since she was going through so much of the same… kind of thing…"

James interrupted. "What do you mean, Ted? I thought you two were talking about why you broke up with her?"

They reached the top of the stairs and Rose turned a corner, leading them toward the bathroom.

"Me?" Ted said. "Who told you that? She broke it off with me months ago. I thought everybody knew that."

"No," James said, "we all thought she'd gone into Hogsmeade that day to try to get back together with you!"

"You think that's what we were talking about?" Ted chuckled drily. "Hardly. We were talking about her parents. I thought you lot knew all about it. You saw the package she got from the Ministry, didn't you?"

James was about to answer when Rose turned, pushing open the heavy door to the second-floor girls' bathroom. She barreled in, followed by Ralph and Scorpius. A red flash suddenly glared through the doorway and there was a scream. James yanked Zane down as he ducked. Another flash jetted through the air overhead. Ted lunged through the doorway, rolled, and landed on one knee, his wand out and pointing.

"Stop!" he shouted.

James was still crouched in the open bathroom doorway. He raised his head and saw Ralph splayed unconscious on the tile floor. Tabitha Corsica was standing over him in the middle of the room, grinning humorlessly. Her hair was askew and her eyes were wild. She had one arm crooked around Rose's neck, yanking the smaller girl nearly off the floor. With her other hand, she poked her wand at Rose's temple.

"Well!" Tabitha exclaimed glassily. "Isn't this quite the party? I hadn't expected so many of you, nor quite this soon, but it wasn't as if I wasn't prepared, was it?"

"Tabitha!" Scorpius said, stepping forward, his own wand out. "What are you doing?"

"As if you didn't know, Scorpius Malfoy," she cried, giggling a little. "I might ask you the same thing! When I saw that you were accompanying this little entourage, I admit I wondered at your own intent."

"This isn't the way it's supposed to happen," Scorpius said, taking another step forward. "I never agreed to a kidnapping."

"Your grandfather knew you wouldn't have the stomach for what this night truly required, Scorpius!" Tabitha declared triumphantly. "But you were never really necessary anyway! Ever since the little service you performed last summer, you've been merely a pawn. Your grandfather told me so himself!"

"What service?" James demanded, getting to his feet and producing his own wand. "What's she talking about, Scorpius?"

"James, get down!" Ted exclaimed, not taking his eyes off Tabitha. "All of you, get back while you can!"

"James," Rose murmured, trying to twist away from Tabitha's wand, "just go!"

"Tell them, Scorpius!" Tabitha commanded, renewing her grip on Rose's neck. "Tell them just how much of a 'trustworthy friend' you are! Tell them how you've played them all for fools!"

Scorpius' wand trembled in his hand as he pointed it at her. He glanced aside at James, his eyes bright and scared.

Tabitha laughed again. "You might do yourself a favor, James Potter, by wondering how I knew so many of you were coming, and exactly when. Ask yourself how I came to be so well-prepared for your arrival. Can you guess? I think even you can!"

It was Albus who answered, calling over James' shoulder. "You have the Marauder's Map!" he said, both shocked and disappointed. "But Tabitha, why?"

"Oh, my dear Albus, the important question is not 'why', it is 'how'," Tabitha replied. "You see, Lucius Malfoy has a rather good thief in his service. Doesn't he, Scorpius?"

Scorpius shook his head angrily, interrupting her. "All right! Just shut up, Corsica! If you insist, I will tell them. It was I who took the map and the Cloak! Are you happy?" He lowered his wand and turned to James, his face tortured. "Look, I lied. It was me. I rode along with my parents the day they went to your grandfather's funeral. I told them I'd wait in the car, but… that's not exactly what I did. While they were gone, I sneaked out of the car and crept into the house. I found your parents' room and

searched it as quickly as I could. I stole the Marauder's Map and the Invisibility Cloak, all under my grandfather's orders. You have to understand, James, I was confused! I wanted to impress my grandfather, and prove myself as a Malfoy and a Slytherin! I wanted to show him I was better than my own turncoat father. But I didn't expect it would lead to this! I swear it!"

James was completely stunned. Breathlessly, he asked, "And the doll?"

Scorpius couldn't meet James' gaze any longer. He dropped his eyes and nodded. "That hadn't even been part of the plan. Grandfather hadn't known of it. I saw it on the bedside table and thought it might be helpful. I thought it'd impress my grandfather. And it *did,* oh yes. He had *grand* plans for that doll, although they didn't work out quite like he'd wanted."

"I knew you were a rat!" Albus cried, pushing forward. "I smelled you a mile away!"

James held his brother back, and amazingly, Albus relented. "But why did you tell us about Tabitha?" James asked. "Why did you show us the memories in the Pensieve?"

"Don't answer that, Scorpius!" Tabitha said. "Enough talk. It's time for the real work of this night to begin. All of you, away! Or Weasley dies. If you think I'm bluffing, you'll know better when she lies dead on the floor and I've descended to the Chamber. Now go!"

"Tabitha, you're as deluded as my grandfather!" Scorpius cried angrily. "Let her go! What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm doing the work I was created for!" Tabitha shrieked, jabbing her wand into Rose's temple. "One thousand years' planning has come to this! I am the edge of the blade of revenge! I am the hand of balance! I am the Bloodline of Lord Voldemort!"

"You?" Scorpius scoffed, stepping forward boldly, not even raising his wand. "If you believe that, then you're as deceived as I've been! We both should have known my grandfather wouldn't tell anyone the whole of his plan. Put down your wand and let her go!"

"Nooo!" Tabitha wailed, and she seemed to crumple. Her eyes were wild, darting. "I *am* the Bloodline! It is my duty to descend to the Chamber of my forefather! I am the host of the Gatekeeper!"

"You aren't," Scorpius declared firmly. "If you were, you would've been able to open the Chamber on your own. But you couldn't, could you? No matter how hard you tried. Because *you* aren't a *Parselmouth*! You're nothing more than a convenient distraction! That was why my grandfather wanted me to show them the memories and make them believe the Bloodline was you: to distract them from the *real* Bloodline!"

"NOOO!" Tabitha shrieked again, closing her eyes and crumpling. Her wand wavered and her grip loosened on Rose. Suddenly, impulsively, she pointed her wand at Scorpius.

"Avada Kedavra!" she screamed, her face twisting in rage. Green light erupted from her wand.

Scorpius lunged, instinctively turning sideways, just as they'd practiced in Defence Club. The jet of green light missed him by inches, striking the wall behind him and exploding in a burst of sparks. Scorpius' maneuver knocked him off balance, however, and he struck his head hard on the edge of the sink as he fell. At that moment, James saw Rose's mouth tighten and she kicked backwards, connecting with Tabitha's shin. The taller girl's wail of anger turned into a cry of pain and she stumbled. Rose ducked from beneath Tabitha's arm and Ted leapt forward. He captured Tabitha as she collapsed, but the fight had completely gone from her. Tabitha dropped her wand and sank to the floor, slipping through Ted's arms.

"Is he all right?" Rose called, jumping to Scorpius' side.

"If he isn't dead," Albus announced, striding into the room and pointing his wand, "I'll kill him."

James gently steered his brother away from the bleeding boy on the floor. "Back off, Al. You can deal with him later. I think he'll be all right."

There was a groan as Ralph sat up, rubbing his head. "What happened?" he moaned. "Am I dead?"

"Tabitha Stunned you," Zane answered, helping Ralph to his feet. "Be glad that's all it was. She stopped at crazy a few blocks back."

"I am the Bloodline," Tabitha sobbed. "I've felt the guiding hand of the Dark Lord! I was promised! My parents would be avenged! No one else meets the requirements! I am the only orphan left within these walls! It must be me!"

Ted glanced sharply down at Tabitha. "What did you say?"

"I am the only orphan left, Ted Lupin!" she cried, raising her eyes angrily to him. "Now that you've gone from these halls, it had to be me! The prophecies say that a child of tragedy would be the host of the Gatekeeper. My parents are gone, dead these many years! And Lucius Malfoy has confirmed it! He told me how the Ministry killed my father, and how my mother died when I was born!"

Ted was shaking his head slowly. "That's not true," he said. He glanced back at James, his face grave. "Then none of you know, do you? I assumed she'd told you, just like she told me."

James shook his head. "Who? Told us what?"

"That day at Hogsmeade," Ted answered. "She needed to talk to me because she'd just found out about her parents. She wanted to talk to someone who'd gone through the same kind of loss. She never knew until the package came. It was too much for her to bear… to find out so much, so fast…"

"Petra?" James said, stepping forward. "You mean the package from her father?"

Ted frowned and shook his head. "James, it wasn't from her father. The Ministry sent it. It was all of her father's *belongings*. He'd willed them to her when he died in Azkaban years ago. When she turned

seventeen, the Ministry released them to her. She never even knew he'd been incarcerated. Amongst the old shirts and shoes, there was a note. It was addressed to the baby daughter he'd never met. He told her he believed that the guards would soon kill him, but that he couldn't do anything to stop it. They thought he was protecting his former Death Eater employers, but he really wasn't. He didn't know anything about them; they'd never told him their names or even showed him their faces. He wanted Petra to know that he would have turned his bosses in if he could've, and that… well, that he loved her, and that he was sorry he'd never be there for her."

"It was Petra?" James whispered, barely allowing himself to consider it. "That can't be!"

Ted nodded seriously. "She doubted it herself. She went to Merlin about it, and showed him the letter. He offered to show her the truth in that Magic Mirror of his, but he warned her that she might not truly wish to know. She looked anyway, and she saw it all, exactly as it'd happened. They threw her father into the Dementor pit. It was… it was awful. She was completely devastated."

Rose glanced from James to Ted, her eyes wide. "But she never told anyone she was an orphan, did she? We all assumed she had a mum and dad like the rest of us!"

"Petra was raised by her grandparents, but she never told us that," Ted replied. "The Gremlins and I, whenever we saw them at the station, we just assumed they were her parents and that they'd had her late in life. She never talked about them, and we always sort of guessed that she didn't have a very happy home life. They'd only ever told her that her mother had died in childbirth. They never spoke of her father at all, and Petra learned not even to ask."

"I should've known," James said, touching his forehead. "I saw her in my dreams over and over. I believed it was Tabitha because I couldn't see her face, but it all fits now. The dark shape in the corner… it talked about restoring the people she'd lost. It told her she would be allowed to avenge them, and even get them back. I even saw them… her parents, reflecting in a sort of glowing green pool! Petra believes the Ministry killed her father, and her mother died as a result, and now she's going to do what she thinks she has to do to get them back! The dark shape in my dreams, it said there was only one way to do it—blood for blood!"

"Lily!" Rose gasped, covering her mouth.

"She wouldn't!" Albus said, shaking his head. "Petra would never hurt Lily. Would she?"

"Morganstern!?" Tabitha half sobbed. "Impossible!"

"Not really," a different voice answered mournfully. "If you think about it, I mean."

Everyone turned to a ghostly figure seated on the windowsill in the corner.

"Myrtle!" Rose cried. "How long have you been there?"

"That's Moaning Myrtle?" Zane asked, arching an eyebrow. "I expected something a little more…

er…"

"It's *rude* to speak of people as if they aren't there," Myrtle chided sadly. "Even if, technically speaking… they aren't. But don't worry, I'm… used to it." She sighed hugely.

James spoke up. "Sorry, Myrtle, but this is really important. What do you know about this?"

"Oh, now everyone runs to Myrtle, don't they? 'What have you seen, Myrtle?' 'Tell us everything you know, Myrtle.' But I know how it goes: the moment I tell you, you'll forget about poor, pathetic Moaning Myrtle. It was the same with your father, James Potter. Your brother looks a lot more like him, even though he's not got that silly fake scar on his forehead."

"What's she talking about, James?" Albus asked out of the corner of his mouth.

James shook his head. "I'm sorry, Myrtle, but this is really serious. Our sister is in trouble. You have to help us!"

"I know," Myrtle cooed. "Poor little Lily. Perhaps she'll keep me company here in the toilet."

"Myrtle!" James cried, exasperated, but Rose placed a hand on his chest, stopping him. She turned to the ghostly figure, a thoughtful look on her face.

"You know, Myrtle, if you help us, I bet Lily's father would be really grateful. I bet he'd even come to visit you, to tell you how much he appreciates all your help."

Myrtle looked petulantly at Rose. "Harry? He wouldn't. Would he? He probably doesn't even remember me."

"I'm certain that he does," Rose said confidently. "I've heard him speak of you. He'd probably be very pleased to, er… catch up with you."

Myrtle seemed to brighten a bit. "Do you really think so? Oh, it's been so long, but I knew he'd come back someday. I've always had a special place for him."

"Yes," Rose nodded. "But first, do tell us. What have you seen? What do you know about Petra?"

"Oh yes," Myrtle replied morosely. "Poor thing. She never once spoke to me, you know, all the times she was here. She probably believed I couldn't see her under that Invisibility Cloak, but those only work on the living."

Zane stepped forward. "Petra has the Cloak! When was she here, Myrtle? What did she do?"

Myrtle flitted down next to Zane and placed a ghostly arm around his shoulders. "Oh, often. She spent the most time down there over the holidays, when few other people were in the school. But she's been down there at least once a week lately. I don't know what she does down there, of course. I, er… don't follow her. But then, not twenty minutes ago, she came through with little Lily. Just before

Tabitha came back again with that silly map."

"Where did Petra take Lily, Myrtle?" Ted asked impatiently. "Did they go into the Chamber of Secrets?"

"Well, of course, you silly boy," Myrtle said, tilting her head coquettishly. "Where else?"

Albus shook his head, exasperated. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

Myrtle peered at him mistily. "Because no one ever asked," she answered simply.

James turned, stalking back into the center of the room. "How do we get down there?" he demanded. "Where's the door?"

"Hah!" Tabitha exclaimed, still crumpled on the floor under the watchful eye of Ted Lupin. "You'll never get through! If I couldn't open it, no one can! Only the true Bloodline can speak the incantation to open the Chamber of Secrets!"

"Is that true, Myrtle?" Rose asked, turning back to the ghost.

"Oh no," Myrtle replied, shaking her head slowly. "No, no, no. Loads of people have opened the Chamber. That horrible Ron Weasley opened it years ago, just by imitating the sounds Harry Potter had made. If he could do it, anyone could."

"You worthless little—" Tabitha cried, straightening. "All that time you watched me trying… You let me make a fool of myself!"

"You didn't need my help," Myrtle sniffed.

"Myrtle," James said seriously, stepping carefully toward the ghost. "We don't have much time. Can you tell us the incantation?"

"Don't you dare!" Tabitha exclaimed, her voice splintering.

"That's enough out of you, Corsica," Ted warned, raising his wand. "Shut up or I'll Stun you. It's the least you deserve."

"It's an awful sound," Myrtle said, ignoring Tabitha. "It gives me shivers to hear it, and I'm dead. I always jumped down into my U-bend before Petra said the incantation."

"Please, Myrtle," Rose begged. "How does it go? We have to get down there."

Myrtle looked sideways at Rose, raising one eyebrow. "You really think Harry will come and see me? You promise?"

"I promise," Rose nodded. "Please tell us."

Myrtle sighed and flitted slowly to the center of the room. Carefully, she opened her mouth and produced a horrible, hissing noise. It was guttural, almost gurgling. It made James' hair stand up.

When she was finished, Zane looked around and asked, "So who's going to do it? I know I can't make a sound like that."

Ralph took a deep breath. "I'll try it," he announced, sighing with resignation. "After all, I'm a Slytherin."

Nobody argued. Ralph opened his mouth and imitated the noise as well as he could. James thought he did a remarkably good job since the same sounds in Ralph's mouth still sent chills down his spine. As soon as he finished, a grating rumble shook the bathroom. The sink directly behind Ralph began to lower, receding into the floor. Tabitha gasped and moved aside, her pale face a mask of awe and jealousy.

"Come on," Ted said grimly. "We have to hurry."

"You can't go, Ted," Rose said, touching Ted's arm. "Unless you plan on taking Tabitha along, too. She's a seventh year. I might be able to guard her, but I'd feel a lot better if you did it."

Ted grimaced in frustration, looking away and fingering his wand. Finally, he turned back. "You go," he said reluctantly. "I'll guard Corsica, but we won't leave until you come back, understood? Besides, it's just Petra down there, right? You'll be able to talk sense into her. She'd never hurt anyone."

James nodded, but he wasn't at all sure that Ted was right. Ted hadn't had the dreams. "Right. Let's go." He took a deep breath and turned toward the ancient stairway.

"And James," Ted called, "Tell Petra the same thing she told me! This isn't the way! Tell her I said that, all right?"

James nodded, and then plunged down the stone steps, his friends following closely.

19. The Sacrifice

James illuminated his wand as he trotted down the ancient stone staircase. Rose and Albus followed, eyes wide, with Zane and Ralph in the rear. James' phantom scar had been aching ever since that horrible burst of pain when he'd moved to kiss Petra; now, as he entered the dark chamber, the ache increased to a throbbing pulse.

"I was in the Chamber of Secrets once before," Rose called, her voice echoing in the dark, cavernous space. "Years ago, when it was still on the Hogwarts tour. My parents refused to go down with me because they'd already seen it of course, and didn't want to relive any of that, so I went with Uncle George. There wasn't much to see, really, since they'd taken the dead Basilisk out years ago. It was just an open space underground. Most of it had caved in."

James gasped and stumbled to a stop, throwing out one hand to warn the rest and holding his wand high in the other.

"Was this a part of the tour when you were here, Rose?" he asked breathlessly.

Rose stopped behind him, her eyes widening. Behind her, Ralph and Zane clambered to a halt as well.

The floor ended at James' feet as if it had been broken away. Beyond it, seamless black space indicated a chasm of unimaginable depth. Ominous whooshing sounds wafted out of the blackness, and as James raised his wand, its light glinted off the edges of huge, swinging blades.

"No," Rose breathed. "This was definitely not a part of the tour. Where did it come from?"

"I'd say it was opened only recently," Zane said, pointing. "Look!"

James saw what Zane was pointing at. A pair of huge stone doors stood open on either side, overlooking the depths of the chasm before him.

"How did Petra open those?" Rose asked incredulously. "They must weigh tons!"

"I'm more interested in how she crossed *that,"* Ralph said, gesturing at the chasm and the huge

swinging blades. "We'll never be able to follow her!"

James stooped down and hefted a medium-sized rock. He weighed it thoughtfully in his hand, and then heaved it out over the chasm as hard as he could. It tumbled into the darkness, turning slowly, and then there was a flash and a spark as one of the magical blades swooped down. It pulverized the rock in midair, and then sucked back up into darkness.

James looked aside at Rose and Ralph, his eyes wide. Ralph shrugged helplessly.

Albus drew a deep sigh. "I think I might know a way to cross that," he said, as if he dreaded admitting it.

"What, Al?" James asked, but his brother had already turned. He walked a few paces away until he stood at the base of the stone steps again. He glanced back.

"Dad taught me this one," he said. "It saved his life once. Maybe we can use it to save Lil." He turned back to the stairs, raised his own wand, and as loudly as he could, shouted, "Accio broomstick!"

Almost a minute passed, and James had begun to doubt the spell had worked when an exclamation of alarm echoed down the stone steps.

"No!" Tabitha's voice cried. "Not my broom! You can't!"

Ted called over her, "Incoming!"

The broom dipped down the stone steps and halted next to Albus. James, standing nearby, could hear the faint hum of the broom. He remembered it well from his doomed attempt to commandeer it last year.

"You can't be serious," Zane said, stepping forward and examining the broomstick. "This is Tabitha's broom! The bogus Merlin staff from last year. You're not going to try to ride it across that chasm, are you?"

"It's my broom now," Albus said grimly. "Tabitha gave it to me, although she may well be regretting it."

Rose proclaimed, "But you can't just fly across! You saw what happened to the rock! I don't know how Petra made it across with Lily, but there must be some other way!"

Albus strode to the edge of the chasm and straddled the broom. "This is no ordinary broom, Rose. I don't know where Tabitha got it, or how it works, but it knows where it needs to be. In a way, it's kind of the reverse of James' Thunderstreak. It knows where to go, and it puts it into the mind of the rider. The broom won't let us get chopped. And besides, we don't have a choice. Hop on behind me, James, and hold on as tight as you can."

James gulped and climbed onto the broom, wrapping his arm tightly around his brother's waist.

"Wait!" Rose cried. "This is mad!"

"That's why we *can't* wait, Rose," James said, gritting his teeth. "If we wait, we'll realize how completely daft this is. Go, Al!"

James felt Albus tense. Together, they coiled, and as Rose reached forward to grab James, her face terrified, Albus threw himself forward, taking James and the broomstick with him.

The broom plummeted under the weight of both James and Albus, and James squeezed his eyes shut, hugging his brother as he leaned over the broomstick, struggling to pull it upright. The broom corrected swiftly, angling upwards and accelerating. James still had his lit wand in his fist. He gripped Albus with his left arm and held the wand aloft, fighting the force of their momentum. Wandlight flashed off a long, steely blade as it dropped alongside them, scything the air. Albus lurched sideways as the broom banked away, and James nearly dropped his wand, fighting to hold on. The air hissed on all sides as huge, curved blades sliced the darkness, dropping like swords and barely missing them. Amazingly, the broom seemed to determine the course on its own, dodging with lightning speed through the flashing, deadly barrage. James struggled to hold on, trying to keep his body as close to the broom and Albus as possible. There was a high, rasping sound as one of the blades sliced a neat seam in his robe, and James felt the chill of the metal whoosh past his skin. He yelped and leaned away, pulling the broom slightly off course.

Albus swore, trying to correct, but it was no use. The broom seemed to have lost its bearing. It pushed upwards beneath them, and James had a sense that they were nearing the other side of the chasm. Suddenly, a rough stone wall loomed into view, as if it were falling on them. Albus pulled up, trying to help the broom to reach the ledge, but it was too high. The broom struggled, flying nearly straight up, still weaving past falling blades. And then, suddenly, there was light and space, and James was spinning off the broom, flailing for something to hold onto. He landed hard on stone, rolled, and scrambled up, his chin scraped and bleeding but otherwise unhurt.

Albus lay ten feet away, dangerously near the edge of the chasm they had just traversed. He moaned and clutched his head.

"Al!" James called, stumbling over to him. "Are you all right?"

"I think we crashed," Albus replied, shaking his head as if to clear it. "That was just sick, wasn't it? Ow!"

James glanced down, "Oh no! I think we broke it!"

"My leg?" Albus asked, examining his shin critically. "Ouch! I'm pretty sure it isn't supposed to bend in that direction, but it's nothing Madam Curio won't be able to fix, right?"

James blinked at Albus' crooked leg. "Oh. Ew. No, that's not what I meant. Sorry, Al. I meant *that*."

He pointed at the broomstick, which was splintered messily into two pieces.

"Oh no! That hurts even worse than my leg! How are we going to get back now?" Albus exclaimed, picking up one of the pieces.

James shook his head. "Like you said, let's just rescue Lily, and we'll figure out the rest later."

Albus started to scramble to his feet, and then hissed in pain, falling back. "I'm no good, James. Unless you plan on carrying me, I'm stuck here."

"Come on, I can't do this by myself!" James said, feeling a sudden, helpless anger.

"Well, if you hadn't pulled us out of control back there, I wouldn't be in this condition, you stupid berk!"

"Me? Whose idea was it to ride the Broom from Hell across the pit in the first place?" "Well, you sure weren't coming up with any brilliant ideas, were you?" "Shh!" James suddenly hissed, half turning.

"Don't shush me, you big git!" Albus cried. "If my broken leg wasn't still attached, I'd beat you with it!"

"SHHH!" James insisted, waving one hand frantically. He cocked his head, listening. Albus stopped and listened as well, furrowing his brow.

"It's a voice," he whispered. "Sort of. That's creepy,"

"It's coming from that cave over there," James pointed. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he could see a greenish light flickering from the mouth of the cave.

"Go, James," Albus whispered urgently. "Go get Lily back if you still can. And if you can't, I swear I'll kill you."

James nodded. "All right. I just hope nobody else beats you to it."

He took a deep breath, still staring at the green glow of the cave mouth, and then began to walk toward it.

James' phantom scar began to sing a long, high note of pain. It rang in his ears, throbbing with the steady thrum of his heartbeat. Petra wouldn't really hurt Lily, would she? He truly wanted to believe she wouldn't, but he remembered the dreams, remembered the coaxing, lulling, infuriating words of that phantom voice. It had promised Petra she could get her parents back if only she was willing to make the hardest choice of all, to repay blood for blood. Petra was obviously not in her right mind. She was in a sort of trance, wasn't she? She was under the control of that horrible voice, and the last shred of the soul of Lord Voldemort which beat in her veins. But even as James approached the

entrance to the cave, he knew that was not entirely true. Petra was being influenced, yes, but she wasn't being forced to do anything. The shred of Voldemort wasn't enough to completely control her, only to sway her, to coax and persuade her. The greatest influence inside Petra was her own broken heart, and her deep, unspoken rage, and the desperate, bottomless hunger for judgment on those who'd taken her parents from her. In the thrall of those emotions, James knew that Petra may well do almost anything if she was convinced that it would satisfy those needs.

Thinking that, James shuddered. He stepped into the mouth of the cave and saw it all.

There was the flickering green pool, lit from within, and there was Petra, still dressed in her pink costume dress. The curls had begun to fall from her hair, and her make-up had run, forming tear-streaks down her cheeks. Her eyes were dry now, however. She had her wand out, pointed at Lily, who stood before her, expressionless and limp, like a puppet. The high, horrible voice was babbling, and James could only now make out the words.

"The boy James comes!" the voice said with delight. "Look upon him, my dear! He comes, just as predicted!"

James gasped, hearing his name in that awful voice, but then Petra turned to him, and his gasp turned to a violent shiver as the pain in his forehead spiked. Petra's eyes were eerily dead. In the flicker of the greenish pool, her face looked like a mask. She held his voodoo doll in her free hand, and James could see that someone had drawn a crude green lightning bolt onto its forehead.

"James," she said blankly, still pointing her wand at Lily, "you shouldn't have come. Now it's too late."

James stumbled forward, moving into the light of the cave. "Petra, what… what are you doing?"

Petra shrugged slightly, and then turned her gaze back to Lily. "What I was made for," she answered, sounding eerily like Tabitha Corsica. She nodded at Lily and said, "You know what to do, dear."

Without blinking, Lily walked slowly around the glowing pool, her bare feet making no noise on the stone. On the far side of the pool, James saw that a series of steps led down into the water. Quite slowly, Lily began to descend the steps. With a shock of horror, James realized that his sister was under the Imperius Curse.

"I'm sorry, James," Petra said. "I know you can't possibly understand why this has to happen. It seemed awful to me at first too, but now I know it is the only way. It really is best for everyone, even Lily. You have to trust me."

"…have to trust me," the horrible, keening voice echoed. It seemed to be speaking constantly, muttering under Petra's words, almost as if it was feeding them to her.

"Lily!" James called, stepping forward. "Stop!"

Lily's eyes didn't so much as flicker. She took another step into the eerie green pool. James reached desperately for his wand, but it wasn't in his pocket. Too late, he realized he must have dropped it when he and Albus had crashed the broom. He ran forward, meaning to drag his sister bodily from the pool, but just as he was within reaching distance, something repelled him. He hurtled backwards through the air, as if pulled by a rope around his waist. He struck the mossy stone wall and fell, the breath knocked out of him.

"One at a time, James," Petra said sadly, still pointing her wand at Lily. "I'm sorry. Please don't try that again. I really don't want to hurt either of you before it's all over."

James gasped for breath, and the phantom scar on his forehead burned like a branding iron. The awful voice echoed Petra's every word, and for the first time James wondered if Petra was even aware of the voice. Was it possible that she didn't realize how it was influencing her? He glanced around, looking for the source of the voice. Just as in his dreams, it seemed to emanate from a shadowy figure in a dark corner. It stood perfectly still, apparently wearing an old bowler hat and a dusty coat. Its arms hung loosely at its sides.

James struggled to get up, but he felt weak and heavy, as if something was pushing down on him. It was the awful weight of some new presence, filling the room like black smoke, darkening it. It was the Gatekeeper. Silently, eerily unseen, it descended into the Chamber, watching, preparing to enter Petra once she completed the necessary rite of willingness: murdering Lily.

Lily took another step into the pool. Her yellow dress began to float about her, sinking into the murky water, and as she descended, something else seemed to be ascending from the other end of the pool. James recognized the shape. It was the young woman he'd seen so often in his dreams: Petra's mother. As Lily lowered into the water, Lianna arose from her own reflection, smiling at her daughter, raising her hands. Petra's eyes shone as she looked at the ascending shape.

"Petra!" James called, catching his breath. "That can't really be your mother! It's a trick! She's not real!"

"Don't listen to him," the high voice whispered, wheedling. "He is the son of those who let her die. He is full of lies and deception. But his voice will soon be stopped forever, and with his death, you shall have your father back as well! Then all will be prepared; balance will be restored. The new age of judgment will be at hand, and all because of your sacrifice…"

"All because of my sacrifice," Petra said quietly, tears running down her face again, smearing her makeup.

Lily's chin touched the surface of the pool. A drop of water hung there, and then she stepped forward again, her mouth dipping below the surface. Her hair spread around her, floating on the water like a corona. The ghostly figure of Lianna Agnellis put one foot onto the stone floor. She wasn't even wet.

"This isn't real!" James screamed desperately, struggling to his feet. "It's all coming from that voice! What is it?"

"There is no voice," Petra sang lightly, rocking her head back and forth. "There is no voice other than the voice of my dead father. You see, I have brought his things here, where they await him. His shoes and hat, his coat. Even his Cloak of Invisibility, which I've used myself these many visits. He'll be so happy to see them again, don't you think?"

James shook his head fervently. "That's my father's Cloak, Petra! You're being deceived!"

Petra didn't seem to hear him. Her eyes gazed trancelike at the shape of her mother, but her wand was still pointed at Lily as she descended the last step, slipping beneath the surface of the water. The heavy, dark sense of the Gatekeeper's presence increased. The task was nearly done; Lily would soon be dead and the Gatekeeper would unite with Petra, its host. Then there would be no sending it back, no stopping it from running rampant upon the earth. James wanted to lunge toward the pool again, risking everything to pull his sister out of the water, but even in his desperation he knew Petra would easily repel him once more. There was no hope, and yet James realized this was his last chance for action. Frantically, he looked from his drowning sister to the shadowy figure in the corner. He could see now that it wasn't a figure at all but simply an assembly of clothes—Petra's father's belongings, propped like a scarecrow. The voice came from within, hidden somehow. Suddenly, horribly, James knew what he had to do.

"This isn't your father," he exclaimed, scrambling across the room, skirting the pool and his dying sister. "Petra, look!"

Before Petra could stop him, James grabbed the empty arm of the coat. He pulled as hard as he could, yanking the coat loose. It tore away from the shape that had supported it, knocking the hat loose as well, and the horrible voice cried out in fury.

"Nooo!" it keened. "Beastly boy! How dare you touch me!"

James stumbled backwards, nearly fainting at the intensity of the pain in his forehead.

Petra gasped, and her wand wavered. "James… what have you—" she exclaimed, and then her voice changed, became very slightly doubtful. "Father?"

The coat had concealed a portrait in a frame. James could see instantly that the portrait had been quite severely damaged, almost entirely destroyed, and then very systematically sewn back together and repainted. The repainted portions didn't move very well, giving the face a twisted, maimed look, but James could clearly see who the portrait represented. One eye stared blankly while the other followed him malevolently, glowing red with one snakelike, vertical pupil.

Petra's face contorted in involuntary disgust. "You're not my father… you're… you're…"

"Finish the task!" the portrait hissed furiously. "Kill Lily Potter first! Then James Potter! Correct my one fatal mistake! It matters not who I am! All that matters is what was stolen from you, and making those responsible for it pay! It is the only way to return those you've lost!"

"Correct your mistake?" Petra said, her expression melting slowly into horrified revelation. "But I thought…"

"My single mistake!" the portrait of Voldemort shrieked urgently. "Killing James Potter first, leaving the stronger one to protect the boy! It was old magic, but powerful magic, and I forgot it! She should've died first, leaving the man and the child to wither before my wand! It was my single, fatal mistake! I was foolish, yes, but now the circle will be closed! You, my soul's final vessel, will kill the girl, Lily Potter, and then the boy, James Potter, and then—" the voice dropped to a seething, greedy hiss, "Harry Potter will come, and finally—finally—we… will… kill… him!"

"Harry Potter?" Petra whispered.

"The doll was meant to summon him," the portrait said quickly. "The plan seemed so simple: add a scar to the forehead, thus making it the father instead of the son. Surely, once Harry Potter's scar reawakened, he would come, and then he would be ours! But instead, we have lured the boy James, granting him the phantom scar and the ability to know our plans, and this, my dear, is even better! I might have foreseen it! My one mistake will be rectified, the order reversed! Lily Potter dies, then James, and then, finally, Harry Potter will lie dead at our feet!"

Wonderingly, Petra said, "But my parents… the promise of balance and perfection… you used me…" Her voice rose, became angry. "You used me!"

"That is because in your heart, you and I are one and the same!" the horrible portrait rasped. "Your living soul carries the last vestige of my own, like a flame in a lantern! We wish for the same things, but from different directions. In the end, we arrive at the very same place: revenge!"

Petra shook her head sadly. "What have I done? I didn't want revenge," she said. "All I wanted was justice…" She turned away from the portrait and looked back at the woman standing on the ledge of the greenly flickering pool. Petra's mother smiled back at her sadly and nodded. Petra hitched a sob. "Justice… and my parents back," she said, her voice cracking. She raised her wand. "Wingardium Leviosa!"

"NOOO!" the portrait screamed, so loud that it seemed to shake the walls.

Lily flew up out of the pool, limp as a rag and streaming water. The shape of Lianna Agnellis fell in on itself, reverting to water. It splashed onto the stone floor and streamed back into the pool.

"Mum!" Petra screamed, unable to resist reaching out to the departed shape, tears shining in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Mum! Dad! I'm so sorry! I couldn't do it!"

James ran forward to the suspended shape of his sister. He reached and pulled her to him, hugging her. She was as limp and cold as death. Gently, he laid her on the floor, and placed his ear to her chest.

"Her heart's still beating!" he cried.

"You foolish girl!" the portrait roared, its face distorting grotesquely. "It is the only way! The part of me in you rebels even now! Resist at your own peril! Kill the girl! It is not yet too late!"

Petra shook her head slowly, approaching the portrait.

"You can't destroy it, Petra," James called, cradling Lily in his arms. "Look at it; other people have tried! Portraits can only be destroyed by the painter, remember?"

Petra was still shaking her head, tears streaking her face but her expression a mask of stern resolve. "That's not entirely true, James," she said quietly. With both hands, she gripped the portrait by its frame and lifted it.

"You are the host of the Gatekeeper!" the high, cold voice of Voldemort proclaimed urgently. "Even now it awaits you! You can feel its presence! You have been chosen since the time of Salazar Slytherin himself! Hundreds of years of prophecy lead to you! You cannot turn aside from the weight of that destiny! It will crush you! Turn back! All is not yet lost! It is not too late!"

"There are two people that can destroy a portrait, although the second person is rarely ever available to do it," Petra said, speaking to James and ignoring the raving voice. She held the painting out with both hands, leveling it over the rippling surface of the pool. "A portrait can only be destroyed by its painter, or if fate allows it, a portrait can be destroyed… by its subject."

"NOOO!" the portrait shrieked, and James saw the canvas bulge slightly at the force of it. Petra dropped the portrait and it fell into its reflection, splashing heavily. The voice of Voldemort's painted visage continued to scream furiously, bubbling as it bobbed for a moment. Horribly, the painted face began to run and streak, as if the liquid in the pool were acid rather than water. Paint bled over the sinking canvas and mingled with the glowing waters, diluting and thinning, drawing feathery black tendrils into the depths. The voice gurgled and faded, ran out of breath, rasped desperately, and then died, leaving only its echo in the Chamber of Secrets. The portrait frame sank out of sight and was lost forever in the bottomless pool.

"Is she breathing?" Petra asked, dropping onto her knees next to Lily.

"I don't know!" James exclaimed, hugging her wet, slight body. "She's so cold!"

Petra nodded and leveled her wand at Lily's throat. "Expelliaqua," she said firmly.

Several seconds went by, and James was sure the spell hadn't worked, but then Lily suddenly lurched in his arms. She coughed thickly and vomited a quantity of water. James helped her into a sitting position, pounding her gently on the back. She coughed more water and gasped a great, ragged breath. James was so preoccupied that he barely noticed the sense of the Gatekeeper fading from the Chamber. Its host had failed the final test. Petra had not killed for it. Weakened and silent, the Gatekeeper streamed away.

"James?" Lily croaked, looking blearily at his face. "Where am I? What happened?"

James shook his head and laughed with relief, tears welling in his eyes. "You're with me, Lil. That's all that matters."

"Hi, Petra," Lily said weakly, glancing aside. "You were great. I cried when you drank the Marsh Hag's sleeping poison."

Petra smiled wanly. "Thanks, Lily."

James and Petra helped Lily to her feet and James put his arm around her, leading her back out of the cave. Petra gathered the Invisibility Cloak but left the eerie collection of her father's clothing. She looked back only once, her face flushed and sad.

"Hey, Petra," Albus said gamely as they approached. "You feeling a bit more yourself, are you?"

Petra nodded but didn't reply. Silently, she knelt next to Albus and examined his leg.

"You're pretty good at this," James said, watching Petra tear a strip of ribbon from her dress. Carefully, she used the ribbon and a length of the broken broom to splint Albus' leg. When she was done, she stood and pulled Albus to his feet.

"Hey," Albus said, surprised. "That feels loads better. How'd you do that?"

"It's sort of a talent," Petra answered, averting her eyes. "Besides, it was just a fracture. You'll be fine in a day or so, once madam Curio has a look at that leg."

James didn't say anything, but he had the distinct sense that Petra was lying about Albus' injury. It had certainly been far more than a fracture. James himself had seen the ugly angle below Albus' knee. Now he was standing on it with the help of a simple splint. It was as if Petra meant to repay them for what had happened, but secretly, and using a rather extraordinary kind of magic.

Petra stood again, gathering the voodoo doll and the Invisibility Cloak. She looked at them in her hands. "These aren't mine," she said, and then handed them to James. "I wasn't even aware of the doll until the portrait mentioned it. I was carrying it the whole time, but somehow I barely knew it. I'm so sorry James. I don't know what else to say."

James accepted the doll and the Cloak. "You were being deceived," he answered simply.

Petra nodded morosely and looked out over the chasm. "I was," she agreed. "But mostly, I was deceiving myself. I can't deny that."

"You've got reasons to be angry and hurt, Petra," James said quietly. "That wasn't the way to deal with it—Ted wanted me to tell you that—but there are other ways. The feelings are real. You just have to figure out what to do with them, right?"

Petra nodded slowly. In the darkness, James saw one more tear track down her cheek.

"You still in one piece, Lil?" Albus asked his sister, looking her up and down. "Why are you all wet?"

Lily frowned and looked down at her sopping yellow dress. "Honestly, I don't have any idea."

"Explanations later," Albus sighed heartily, hopping on his good leg. "First, how are we going to get back across that?" He gestured toward the dark chasm.

"Same way I got here," Petra answered softly. "We walk."

Albus grimaced. "Walk? What are you? A ghost?"

"No," Petra replied, almost to herself. "Apparently, I'm the Bloodline of Lord Voldemort." She stepped forward, walking straight off the edge of the cliff. James gasped, horrified but unable to look away. Petra didn't fall however. Her footstep was supported by a small stone platform, rather like a stepping stone, that had appeared out of nowhere. She looked back, one foot still on the edge of the chasm.

"Stay close and try very hard not to think about what you're doing," she said, and James shivered. She didn't sound entirely confident that it would work, but what choice did they have? James hesitated, but then he realized that, for the first time in nearly an hour, the phantom scar on his forehead didn't hurt. He sighed and moved in behind Petra, herding Lily and Albus in front of him.

"This is completely insane," Albus commented.

"Don't look down," Petra answered. Without a pause, she began to walk. Jerkily, Albus, Lily, and James began to follow her. Against all probability, none of them fell as they moved out over the depths of the chasm. Neither did the swinging, whooshing blades descend on them. James' footsteps landed on rough stone steps, each about the size of a dinner plate, and the moment his heels pulled away from each step, they sank away quickly, falling into darkness. Dimly, James heard the clank and rattle of machinery, and he recognized it. It was the same sound he'd heard in his dreams of this place, only now he knew what it was. Somehow, the stones were raised mechanically, operated by the sheer magic of Petra's passage. Perhaps the mechanism could only be summoned by the Bloodline, or perhaps it merely responded to anyone who knew the proper talisman, as Petra obviously did. Either way, it definitely helped not to think about what one was doing or to look down. As James placed his last footstep on the opposite ledge, collected into the waiting arms of Rose, Ralph, and Zane, he couldn't resist looking back. The last stepping stone fell away into darkness, attached to a complicated rigging of struts and coils. It squeaked and rattled as it retracted, and then it was gone, as if it'd never been there at all.

"Petra!" Rose exclaimed, weak with relief. "Lily! Everyone's all right!"

Zane grinned incredulously. "I thought you both were goners for sure. What happened?"

"James crashed us," Albus griped, shaking his head. "About broke my leg off. It's a good thing Petra

here is a quick one with a splint."

"Yeah, she's a great one to have around in a medical emergency," Ralph agreed, looking at Petra a little worriedly.

"Lily, you're soaked!" Rose exclaimed, laughing and wiping a tear from her eye. "Here, let me help you." Rose produced her wand and waved it at Lily in a complicated gesture, pronouncing the proper spell. Hot air suddenly blew from the tip, drying Lily's dress and making her giggle.

"And what of the Gatekeeper?" Zane asked James as the group made its way toward the stone stairs and the light beyond.

"Gone," James answered. "I felt it leave."

"For good?"

James shrugged. "It didn't get Petra as its host. She wouldn't kill for it, not in the end. It doesn't have a foothold here anymore. It's finished."

Zane nodded, frowning a little. "If you say so, mate. Let's get out of here. This place creeps me out big time."

"Yeah. There's a reason they call it the Chamber of Secrets," Albus agreed.

James nodded, glancing back. Fervently, he said, "Let's just hope that was the last of its secrets."

"And that's the story as well as I can tell it," James said, sitting back in the single chair across from the Headmaster. It was the next day, and the bright sunlight and birdsong of late morning wafted in through the open window. "We came up through the girls' second-floor bathroom and Ted led Tabitha straight here to your office. The rest of us took Lily to the Great Hall to meet up with Mum. She called Aunt Hermione, Uncle George and Uncle Ron back from the search and everybody decided to go ahead with the wrap party after all, although it was more a celebration of Lily's return by that point."

Merlin nodded slowly, his fingers steepled. He shared a look with Harry Potter, who stood nearby, arms folded and staring at the floor.

"And Miss Morganstern attended the party?" Merlin asked.

James shook his head. "No, I think she thought it'd be best for her not to be there. I mean, considering

everything."

Harry spoke without raising his head. "It wasn't her fault. She was being deceived."

"It was not entirely her fault," Merlin corrected grimly. "She was being deceived, yes, but she was allowing the deception to occur. She has admitted so herself. The fact that she was able to throw off the deception in the end is proof that she could have done so all along, had she so chose."

"She is cursed with the last ghost of the soul of Voldemort in her very blood," Harry said, finally raising his eyes. "He was a wily liar and a master manipulator. Far greater witches and wizards than Petra Morganstern succumbed to his deceptions."

Merlin nodded. "And they were also responsible for the choices they made as a result."

James sat forward in his seat. "What are you saying? You think Petra is evil just because she was unlucky enough to get chosen for that stupid Horcrux dagger?"

"No, James," Merlin said gently. "For that, she is truly unfortunate. To the extent that Petra allows herself to be influenced by that accursed soul, however, she may still choose to do that which would make her evil indeed. She has admitted that *she* was the one that cursed Josephina Bartlett with the Vertigo Hex, knowing everyone would blame Miss Corsica, all just to prove to herself that she could do it. She came very close to making the ultimate evil choice last night, and nearly doomed all of mankind in the bargain. Had you not been there at exactly the right moment, revealing the mysterious portrait, all might well have been lost."

"You don't know that," James said, but uncertainly.

"Oh, but I do, James," Merlin said, looking James in the eye. "And for that, I owe you an apology."

"An apology? Why?"

Merlin sighed deeply. "I was very wrong about you, James Potter." The big man paused, as if unwilling to elaborate. He was gazing straight ahead, and James realized that he was looking past him, at something on the rear wall. James turned and looked over his shoulder. The portrait of Albus Dumbledore was meeting Merlin's gaze. He smiled slightly and nodded. Then, barely noticeable, Dumbledore winked at James. James frowned and turned back to Merlin.

"I've been *advised,"* Merlin said sardonically, "to avoid the temptation to keep secrets or tell halftruths. Your Albus Dumbledore and I have discussed the topic at great length, and I admit that, until recently, I did not much agree with him. Regardless, recent events have shown the validity of his argument. James Potter, in the presence of your father, I will tell you the whole of the truth." Merlin sighed again, and then stood. He moved from behind his desk, passing in front of Harry.

"It is true," he explained. "I was well aware of the possibility that the entity called the Gatekeeper might follow me back from my long journey outside of time. Salazar Slytherin made it very clear to

me. He hoped and planned for it, and my heart was in such a state that I did not much care. 'Damn the world,' I thought. 'If the Doombringer is to come, then fate will save mankind or it will not.' I washed my hands of it. Last year, when I returned to the world of men, I despised this age. I determined that if the Gatekeeper had indeed followed me, I would not even use the small power at my disposal to keep it at bay." Merlin held up a hand, displaying the glinting black ring. "And then I discovered the presence of the Borleys. Nuisances, really, the magical equivalent of cockroaches, and yet it proved to me that things had indeed followed me from the Void. If the Borleys were here, then surely the Gatekeeper was as well. I determined to capture the Borleys using the best tool for such a task: the Darkbag, which, as you know, contains the last earthly shred of pure darkness from the Void. I imprisoned the Borleys inside it, dozens of them, although at the time I could not say why I chose to do so; it seemed merely right and responsible. The truth is that I was coming to know this age, and while there was—and still is—much of it that I find wretched, I discovered I did not hate it as much as I'd thought. More important, I had come to care for some of the people in this age. Chiefly, you, Mr. Potter, and your rambunctious, irreverent friends.

"As I realized this, I knew I had but one choice: I must do what I could to rid the world of the Gatekeeper, whose very presence in this sphere was my responsibility. Having decided that, I came to know that there were those in this world who knew of the Gatekeeper, and wished to *use* it. These were the disciples of Slytherin, who, like him, had fooled themselves into believing the Gatekeeper could be controlled and used as a hand of vengeance. I knew of the other half of the Beacon Stone, and sensed that it was in the possession of these bent individuals. I followed their progress as they sought the Gatekeeper. I watched and waited, using this very Mirror." He indicated the Amsera Certh, which stood hooded nearby. "My devices could sense events of dark magical power, pinpointing their location. When that happened, I watched in the Mirror. Eventually, I became involved, travelling to the place where the agents of Slytherin met the Gatekeeper. I suspect that you witnessed this, Mr. Potter, along with Miss Weasley and Mr. Deedle. I found them in an unplotted forest, at the tomb of Tom Riddle. There, the Gatekeeper had revived the memory of Voldemort, forcing it to speak through the grave statue. The Gatekeeper demanded to be led to the human who would best serve as its host. The statue told of the boy who had defeated Voldemort, and the Gatekeeper assumed that this boy, Harry Potter, would be the logical choice for its host. I sensed it turning toward you, Harry, homing in on you…" Merlin looked up at James' father. "It located you without even leaving the grave. It sensed you in the web of humanity, and determined that it could not have you. I felt it turning you over in what passes for its mind, felt it dismiss you, not as unworthy, but as unconquerable. It knew it could never bend you to its purposes."

Harry visibly shivered. "I remember that," he said in a low, wondering voice. "I was in the Auror offices at the Ministry, talking to Kirkham Wood. All of a sudden, it was like I was outside myself, looking down on my body as if I'd been shoved aside while something else shuffled through the contents of my brain. It only lasted a few seconds, and then suddenly, it was over. Kirkham hadn't noticed a thing. I decided I'd imagined it, or that I was just a bit overstressed. But it must have been that… thing… examining me."

Merlin nodded. "It would take a powerful wizard to sense it. The Gatekeeper numbs its prey so that few ever remember its passing. Surely, that fact alone was part of why it knew it could never claim

you, Harry. So it moved on. Even as that demented Lucius Malfoy spoke to it, beckoning for it to join them, telling it that they had prepared a Bloodline to be its host, I sensed it moving on, past you, Harry, looking further… looking for you, James."

"Me?" James exclaimed, shocked. "Why?"

"It makes perfect sense if you think about it from the Gatekeeper's view. The prophecies all claim that the host of the Gatekeeper would be a child of great loss, or an orphan. It sought out Voldemort, the orphan who most represented the Gatekeeper's aims, and found him a corpse. Thus, it logically sought out the one powerful enough to have bested Voldemort, and found yet another orphan: Harry Potter. He, however, was too strong, and therefore of no more use to the Gatekeeper than the dead Voldemort. So it looked just a bit further, to the first-born son of Harry Potter. And it found, interestingly, that that very boy had recently experienced his own tragedy, the sudden loss of your grandfather. Further, it sensed that you were in attendance on the very night that the Gatekeeper had arrived in the earth, and that you, James Potter, had even helped facilitate its descent."

"But I didn't mean to!" James blurted. "I was trying to stop it!"

Merlin held up a hand. "It matters not to the Gatekeeper. I sensed it homing in on you, learning of you, all in that moment in the graveyard, even as Lucius Malfoy was speaking to it. I sensed you in its thoughts, James, and that is when I stepped out into the open, to distract it. I called to the Gatekeeper, identifying myself as the bearer of the Beacon Stone. It remembered me from my time in the Void. The first thing it did was ask for you, James. I told it as sternly as I could that you knew nothing of it, that you would never consent to be its host. But it laughed. It told me that you had already sought it out, and that you were watching at that very moment. Lucius Malfoy looked and saw you, reflected in the window of an abandoned shack nearby. He pointed at you, and the Gatekeeper smiled. It had known you'd been watching from the moment it turned its attention to finding you, James. I turned and saw your reflection for myself. I knew I had to get back, to warn you, but you closed the Focusing Book, shutting me out. It took me much of a day to get back to the castle by other methods, and by then, I had determined a rather different opinion of you, I am afraid."

"You'd decided I was on the Gatekeeper's side?" James asked, perplexed.

"Not consciously," Merlin answered. "No more than Petra Morganstern was on the Gatekeeper's side. I decided you were being manipulated by it, and by your own desires. I regret to admit this, James, but I feared that your desire to be like your father was being exploited, used by the Gatekeeper and the forces of chaos. When your mother's Howler went off, telling us all that she believed you'd stolen the Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map, it further convinced me that you were, in fact, working toward the Gatekeeper's ends. I decided to watch and to wait, hoping that I was wrong about you. And then, when your own sister went missing on the night of the play, I knew that it was the moment of truth. I could scarcely believe you'd harm her, but those in the thrall of deception have done even worse things than murder their sisters. I planned to take you away from the school, removing you from whatever plan the Gatekeeper had for you. You foiled me, of course, by the simple expedient of being young and quick. Even then, I could have taken you had I truly wished to. In my deepest heart,

however, I had decided to trust you—and fate. It was my own trial of the cord, much like your test, James, in the cave of my cache. You chose to hold onto the golden cord even though letting go would have been far easier. Thus, I chose to hold onto the one thin cord of trust in you as well. If I did so foolishly, then the world would not last long enough to blame me. As it turns out, however, that moment of trust was indeed wise. In fact, I believe it saved us all."

James blew out a sigh. "Wow. So that was why you were so secretive and scary that day in your office."

"The portrait told me it was a mistake," Merlin admitted, glancing aside. "Dumbledore did not approve of my attitude toward you, and told me so upon your departure."

From the wall behind James, Dumbledore's voice spoke. "I was nothing if not respectful, Merlinus. But yes, I did warn you that you doubted the boy at your own peril."

Merlin nodded. "Yes, you made your point quite clear, as I recall."

"I am cursed with the burden of helping those who've succeeded me to not make the same mistakes I did," Dumbledore said, looking at Merlin, then Harry. "I myself only learned these lessons mere days before my death. Too late to make much of a difference, although I did what little I could."

Harry nodded, unsmiling. "So what is to be done with Petra Morganstern, then?"

Merlin shrugged, returning to his desk. "She is guilty of possession of stolen property in the form of the Invisibility Cloak and kidnapping Lily Potter. As Head Auror, the owner of the Cloak, *and* the girl's father, Harry Potter, I might ask you the same thing."

Harry thought seriously for a long moment. Finally, he looked at James. "I won't be pressing any charges," he said. "James, do you agree?"

James nodded. "She didn't know what she was doing, Dad. And when I showed her how she was being deceived, she turned things around really quickly. She doesn't want to hurt anyone."

"Be very aware of what you are doing, my friends," Merlin said quietly. "Miss Morganstern is a very complicated young woman."

"But she isn't evil," James said emphatically.

"No more than you are, James, or your father, or I myself. And yet I, at least, have wrought great evil, all in the name of love. We are all capable of evil, depending on the choices we make and the philosophies we embrace. The greater the potential for good in any of us, the greater the opposite potential for wickedness. Miss Morganstern has, to say the very least, great, great potential. The only question is how she will choose to invest it."

"But she did the right thing," Harry said. "In my experience, those who choose to do right usually get

addicted to it. The soul of Voldemort has a toe-hold in her, yes; she can't help that. But she has proven that it isn't enough to rule her."

"It is enough to divide her," Merlin answered. "And she will never conquer that one small part of her that belongs to him. It will always be there, wheedling, poisoning, tempting, lying. Further, his power is her power. She has shown that she uses that power—granted, for good, so far, such as in healing Albus' leg—but how long will she be able to control it? Even now, she leaves these walls to return to a loveless and bitter life. She has denied herself the return of her own parents so that Lily and you, James, might live. Meanwhile, she watches you go home to loving parents and a life she can only dream of. Don't think that, despite her actions, she will not lie awake on cold, lonely nights, pining hopelessly for her dead parents, and wondering, wondering, if on that fateful night in the Chamber of Secrets she made the wrong choice."

James shook his head, not wanting to believe it. "She'd never think that. Petra is good."

"She *wants* to be good," Merlin agreed. "I will grant you that, James. Let us hope that that is enough."

Harry approached James and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Scorpius has agreed to help us locate his Grandfather Lucius. He's actually a little more enthusiastic about it than I'm comfortable with, to tell you the truth, but his grandfather's lies and manipulations have turned the boy into quite a valuable ally for us. Still," he said, turning his attention to Merlin, "what of Tabitha Corsica? She's returned the map. Apart from Stunning Ralph, she hasn't technically done anything wrong whatsoever, despite her best efforts. I have no jurisdiction over her at all."

"Leave her to me," Merlin replied, sitting down at his desk again. "She is not so far gone that she cannot be helped. I have known someone like her."

"You're kidding!" James said, getting to his feet as his father prepared to leave. "You think Petra's going to go all Dark Lord on us, but you think there's hope for Corsica just because you've 'known someone like her'?"

Merlin looked up at James, his brow lowered. "Perhaps I misspoke," he said, his voice rumbling. "What I meant to say was I have been someone like her."

James stared at the Headmaster, frowning in consternation, but Harry steered him away with his hand. "Come on, son," he said, smiling a little. "The Headmaster has a lot to do. I saw your performance on the Omnioculars, by the way. You're quite the little actor. Makes me wonder about the time you told me you had nothing to do with that broken clock in the parlor, eh?"

James changed the subject as quickly as he could. "So are you heading home right away?"

"No, actually," Harry answered, closing Merlin's door. "I'm going to check in on Albus down in the Slytherin quarters. And then I, er, owe someone a visit, apparently."

James began to tromp down the spiral staircase. "Who's that?"

"Moaning Myrtle," his dad sighed, smiling. "Rose insisted. She said she promised. Just come and get me if I'm in there for more than an hour, all right?"

20. The Long Ride Home

The last week of school went by as if blown by a hard wind. Zane stayed over, spending a night both with James and Ralph in their dormitories, sleeping on cots provided by the house-elves, and staying the rest of the time in his old house dormitory. The Ravenclaws were happy to see him, and Horace Birch proudly proclaimed him a lifelong Ravenclaw "despite the fact you're a ruddy Yank and a coffee drinker, even though everybody knows all true Ravenclaws live on tea and Butterbeer."

To James' delight, a review of The Triumvirate appeared in the Daily Prophet, carefully glossing over the kidnapping of Lily as 'an unfortunate scare involving a temporarily lost child' since she had turned up later that evening apparently unhurt and perfectly cheerful. The review had called the play a 'surprisingly inventive and entertaining bit of academic theatre' despite the somewhat controversial Muggle production techniques implemented by the director, Muggle Studies professor Tina Grenadine Curry. This was blithely forgiven when the reporter had discovered that the Muggle generators, which were purportedly operating the stage lights, were running rather mysteriously without a drop of petrol in them, therefore rendering the nonmagical claims of the production completely moot.

"Here we go," Rose said, pointing at the newspaper at breakfast on the last day of school. "'James Sirius Potter, portraying the part of the beloved Treus, proved that neither youth nor inexperience can prevent a delightful performance in someone so well-trained and obviously inspired. Young Mr. Potter's surprising Thespian talent leads this reporter to muse that, in his case, the apple certainly did not fall far from the tree, even if it did perhaps fall in an entirely different vocational orchard.'"

"That's the fifth time you've read that," James said, grinning and red-faced.

"Not that you mind," Zane said, nudging his friend.

Ralph asked, "What's it mean about James falling down in a different orchard?"

"It means James is as talented as his father," Rose proclaimed, folding the paper, "Just in some quite different ways. No one could ever imagine Harry Potter performing in a play, could they?"

"I suppose not," James agreed, still grinning sheepishly. "But I think that's about enough acting for me."

Zane shook his head. "You say that now, but you just wait. Pretty soon, you'll start missing the spotlight. You know, my dad works in the Muggle film industry. He could probably hook you up with a part in a movie. There's even talk of remaking the movies based on that magical book series. You'd be perfect for it!"

"Not a chance," James insisted, but he was drowned out by the chorus of enthusiastic agreement. He decided not to fight it, and in the end, everyone agreed that, in fact, Albus would probably better fit the part, despite the fact that he couldn't act as well as James.

"I'd do it though," Albus said seriously. "I could even do my own spells! Would they allow that, you think?"

Zane shook his head as everyone laughed.

That night, James enlisted Zane's help in removing the lightning bolt scar from his voodoo doll. Carefully, Zane used his wand to magically scrub the marking from the tiny burlap forehead. Strangely, James could feel the progress of it. It tingled, and the tingle diminished as the scar vanished. Finally, Zane handed James the doll, nodding at a job well done.

"Clean as the wind-driven snow," he proclaimed.

James examined it. Sure enough, there was no sign that the scar marking had ever been there. He wrapped the doll in a cloth and put it in the bottom of his trunk. He wasn't sure what he would do with it now that he knew it could be used rather dangerously, but he suspected he would simply give it back to his mum. Now that she knew to keep an eye on it, he felt confident that there was no one who'd take better care of it.

At dinner on the last day of school, Gryffindor was awarded the House Cup, primarily because of late points added to their score by Merlin for James and Petra's performance in the play. James was very happy about the award, and as the Gryffindor table exploded into applause, congratulating James and Petra, he felt, perhaps for the first time, that he was living up to his father's legend as a Gryffindor. At the end of the Gryffindor table, floating uncertainly but with a nervous smile on his face, the ghost of Cedric Diggory waved at him. The Grey Lady wafted next to him, her pale face inscrutable but apparently content.

For the evening's entertainment, the Hufflepuffs put on a very amusing puppet show rendition of *The Triumvirate,* making affectionate fun of everyone involved. James laughed until tears ran from his eyes. When he looked to share the joke with Petra, however, her seat was empty. He didn't see her at all the rest of the night.

Finally, the next morning, it was time for the trip home. Zane had his small bag packed, whistling lightly as James lugged his trunk out to the steps.

"It'll be great to ride the train again," Zane said, smiling happily. "I miss that old cart lady. She wasn't there when I rode into Hogsmeade with your mum, you know that? Apparently, she only works the

official Hogwarts Express runs. Better profit margin, I guess."

"Hmph," James said, plopping onto his trunk. "I didn't know that."

"I bet she'll be there more often, though, once they open up the new route. I saw the place where they're expanding the track through the mountains. It'll connect with some new wizarding village over on the other side of some gorge. I can't remember the name of the gorge or the village, but your mum said once they finish the track, it'll save travelers loads of commute time and Floo powder. I bet the cart lady'll have a lot more customers then."

"I'm sure she'd be glad you were so concerned for her welfare," James said, rolling his eyes.

"I can't help it," Zane agreed. "I'm just a caring kind of guy. Oh yeah, that reminds me, I think I figured out the secret of Tabitha's crazy broom."

James perked up. "Yeah? What was it?"

Zane reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a small envelope. "Albus let me take a look at the bit of the broom he'd been using as a splint. I broke it open and Gennifer and Horace helped me do some tests on it. Look." He handed the envelope to James.

James thumbed it open and peered inside. It contained a tiny shred of black fabric.

"I wouldn't touch it," Zane said. "I did accidentally, and it still feels pretty oogie."

"'Oogie'?" James said, handing the envelope back to Zane.

"Sorry. Technical term I picked up from Raphael back home. Hinky. Creepified. Completely off the spook-o-meter."

"I get the picture," James sighed. "But what is it?"

Zane plopped down next to James on his trunk. "Remember last year when you explained corked brooms to me?"

James nodded. "Sure. When a Quidditch player threads something magical into their broomstick, basically turning it into a big giant wand."

"Yeah, well, we weren't so far-off about Corsica's," Zane replied. "We thought it was corked because it was Merlin's staff, but obviously, that was a red herring. It was corked because it contained a big, long strip off the robe of a Dementor."

"A Dementor?" James exclaimed, turning to look at Zane. "How's that even possible?"

Zane shrugged easily. "Beats me, but there's no question about it. Maybe Corsica's people are friendly enough with those things that they were able to get a hand-me-down. After all, you said the Dementors

were loyal to Voldy and his pals."

"They weren't so much loyal to him as they were evil like him, but still… you could be right."

"It checks out," Zane nodded. "If what Merlin told you is true, Dementors are the same stock as the Borleys. They come from outside of time, and can manipulate it a little. That's pretty much what Tabitha's broom seemed to do, wasn't it? It knew just enough of the future to know where it needed to be. Fortunately for you and Albus, it took on the purpose of its owner."

"Wow," James breathed, looking at the envelope in Zane's hand. "I know that thing saved Albus' and my life, but still, I have to say I'm glad it got destroyed. Corked with a Dementor's robe! That's super creepy."

"Oogie, even," Zane agreed, pocketing the envelope. "Albus said I could keep this. I'm going to give it to Chancellor Franklyn when I get home so he can study it. I bet I get brownie points from here to doomsday for it!"

James shook his head, smiling at his friend's irrepressible temerity.

Shortly thereafter, Ralph, Rose, and Albus dragged their trunks out to the step as well, awaiting Hagrid's carriage to the station. James smiled in the sunlight. It was going to be a fun trip home.

"You still haven't really told us what happened on the other side of the chasm," Ralph said as the train picked up speed, leaving Hogsmeade station. "I mean, what was the real deal with Petra anyway? Was she under the Imperius Curse or something?"

James shook his head. "No, no, nothing like that. She was being deceived. She had no idea that she was the Bloodline of Voldemort. Lucius Malfoy arranged for the Invisibility Cloak, my voodoo doll, and the portrait of Voldemort to be planted into the box of her father's things before it ever left Azkaban. She was blinded to the portrait and doll, tricked by the little part of Voldemort in her blood. Later, when she heard the voice of the portrait in the cave, she thought it was the voice of her dead father. It sounds mad, but I think she was feeling a little mad anyway after finding out all that stuff about her mum and dad."

"So none of the things we saw in the Pensieve were about Tabitha after all, right?" Ralph said. "All those memories were about Petra. Scorpius let us believe Tabitha was the Bloodline because that's what his grandfather told him to do, just to keep us distracted from the real thing; is that it?"

"I don't care what you all say," Albus said determinedly, "that little squid is ten kinds of trouble. He just better stay out of my way."

Rose closed the book on her lap and looked up. "I admit he started out pretty awful, what with stealing the Cloak, map, and doll, and then lying to us about the Bloodline, but all of that was on his grandfather's orders. You can't really blame him for wanting to live up to the legacy of his family; he didn't know any better. Besides, even by the time he was showing us the memories in the Pensieve, he was beginning to have doubts about his grandfather's plan. That's why he didn't actually say Tabitha's name. He was halfway hoping we'd figure out it was Petra after all."

"And he did do the right thing in the end," James added. "He never knew that hurting Lily was part of the plan. When Lily was kidnapped, he totally gave up his grandfather and Tabitha. We'd never have learned the truth about Petra if Scorpius hadn't been there with us in the bathroom."

"I think both of you have crushes on him," Albus said dourly. "I'm not falling for that 'I'm just a poor misguided bad boy' bit. Someday, he and I are going to finish what we started on the train ride here."

"I'd be careful, Albus," Zane commented, raising his eyebrows. "I saw Scorpius at the last Defence Club meeting and he's gotten pretty slick with that Artis Decerto stuff. He was waxin' on and waxin' off like a boy ninja."

Albus rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

Ralph stood up and peered out the compartment door. "Hey, that reminds me: which direction are Louis and Victoire in?" he asked, peering up and down the train corridor. "Louis has a book on Middle Eastern defensive magic he said I could borrow over the summer."

"Victoire stayed behind," Rose answered. "She's staying with George and Ted in Hogsmeade until George and Angelina's wedding. And I usually try my best not to know where Louis is."

Ralph stretched and said, "I'm going to go walk a bit and try to find him. Who's coming?"

"I'm in," James answered, standing. "I'm going to fall asleep if I stay here. We shouldn't have stayed up so late playing Winkles and Augers last night."

"I'm going to ask the cart lady about her working hours," Zane interjected, opening the compartment door.

"Louis has a book on magical martial arts?" Rose asked Ralph as the five of them filed out into the corridor.

"He's really gotten into it," Ralph nodded. "Posters all over his dormitory of the Harriers and famous wizard martial artists and stuff. He even asked his mum to order him one of those hoods with the eye slits in it so he can look all mysterious."

"Our Louis?" Albus exclaimed, stifling a grin. "I should have known there was a repressed fighter buried under all that stuffed shirt."

"Debellows said he's got some natural talent," Ralph said, shrugging. "Of course, he said the same thing about you, James."

"And I got top marks on my Wizlit essay," Rose said pointedly, steering the conversation away from Professor Debellows, for whom she still had little respect. "Professor Revalvier said my insight on the golden age of wizarding literature was—"

James suddenly stopped in the aisle, forcing everyone to pile up behind him.

"Ow! Ralph, get off my toe, you bloody dump truck!" Albus cried. "What gives?"

"Do you see it?" James whispered urgently, pointing. Everyone stopped and craned their heads, looking in the direction James was pointing.

"What are we looking for?" Zane asked after a moment.

Rose said, "I don't see anythi—"

"There!" Albus interrupted, pointing over Zane's shoulder.

Something moved inside the network of flickering shadows near the end of the corridor.

"It's like a living shadow," Ralph said.

"It's the last Borley!" Albus declared, pushing past James. "And he's mine!"

"No magic!" James commanded. "Remember? That's how it grew last time!"

The Borley capered in moving shadows as the train pushed through the forest. It teased and cartwheeled, as if begging to be hexed. Suddenly, the door at the end of the corridor slid open, letting in the noise of the rushing wind and clacking wheels. All five students cried out in warning, stumbling over each other, but the Borley took advantage of the opening and leapt through the door just as it was sliding shut again.

"How very curious," the newcomer said in a deep voice. James looked up and rolled his eyes. It was Merlin, wearing his travelling cloak, his staff at his side.

"Merli—er, Headmaster!" Rose exclaimed, pushing forward. "It just went that way!"

"The Borley!" James added hastily. "The last one! It must have been on the train this whole time!"

Merlin's face darkened slightly. "We mustn't take any chances this time, my friends. I will follow it and corral it. Mr. Potter, you know what the Darkbag looks like, do you not? It is in my compartment,

two cars behind you, number six. It will allow you inside. The trunk beneath the seat will open with this key. Meet us as soon as you can." The big man produced a golden key on a long loop of chain and held it out to James. James took it, feeling rather important.

"Quickly, Mr. Potter," Merlin prodded. "We haven't a moment to spare."

James turned on his heel and ran back the way they'd come, fighting the disorienting sensation of running full out in a moving, swaying train. He passed through two connectors and came to the compartment marked number six. The windows were smoked, but the door was unlocked. James entered quickly and saw the Headmaster's trunk peeking out from beneath the left side bench. He dropped to his knees and heaved it into the light. The small golden key fit snugly in the lock and turned with a minute click. When James threw the trunk open, he was surprised to see that the Darkbag was the only thing inside it, folded neatly on the wooden floor of the trunk. Of course, he realized, this was one of those magical trunks which opened onto different contents depending on what key you unlocked it with. Considering the great importance and potential danger of the Darkbag, which imprisoned the rest of the starving Borleys inside its seamless dark, James felt particularly honored to have been asked to retrieve it. He touched it a little fearfully, remembering Merlin's warnings about it, but it felt perfectly normal. It was simply a large, heavy, black cloth bag, cinched shut with a golden cord and bearing a long shoulder strap on the top. Having assured himself that the Darkbag was relatively safe to hold, James slung it around his neck and over his shoulder, wearing it like a backpack. He slammed the trunk, hung the key around his neck on its fine chain, and ran back toward the front of the train.

He was rather out of breath by the time he found everyone again. They were gathered at the head of the first car, staring hard at the door. Merlin looked up as James entered. His face was grim, but James thought he could sense some enjoyment in the big man's expression; the Headmaster was pleasuring in the hunt.

"We chased it here," Zane said, grinning. "It slipped right through the crack in the door, but the next car is the coal car. End of the line!"

"Miss Weasley," Merlin said, turning to her, "you will open the door on my mark. Mr. Deedle, your wand has rather unique properties, as you know. If the Borley manages to get past me, then you, and only you, may attempt to Stun it. Your spell will not halt it but will distract and attract it, giving me the time I need. I will place the Borley in a trance. Then, Mr. Potter, I will require the Darkbag."

Ralph gulped audibly, producing his huge wand.

"Got it," Rose said, a little breathlessly. James nodded understanding.

Albus stood back. "Last time, it was standing on the metal bit that holds the cars together," he explained. "So aim low."

"Thank you," Merlin nodded, smiling slightly.

Rose gripped the door handle and everyone took a deep breath. Merlin nodded at her and she pulled, jerking the door all the way open and letting in a push of warm, noisy air. James squinted in the barreling wind and smoke, and then gasped, his stomach plummeting. Merlin slowly took a step back, spreading his arms to keep everyone behind him.

"I may not know what I'm talking about here," Zane said weakly, his eyes bulging, "but I'm pretty sure those aren't Borleys."

In fact, the Borley was exactly where they'd expected it to be. It danced on the huge iron knuckle that connected the train to the coal car, teasing them. Over it, however, darkening the air all around the coal car, swarming like a malignant living cloud, were dozens—perhaps hundreds—of Dementors.

"It's the entire hive!" James called over the sound of the clacking wheels and rushing wind. "All the way from London! Why are they here?"

Merlin didn't take his eyes from the horrible swarm. "I think," he said slowly, "the answer to that question is all too clear."

Rose looked from Merlin to the open, howling doorway. "The Gatekeeper is up there," she said, nodding toward the engine, which was just visible over the length of the coal car and the swarming Dementors.

Suddenly, the train's whistle blew, shrieking a long, deafening note. Rose clapped her hands to her ears and winced. Simultaneously, the engine seemed to lurch forward, picking up speed. James stumbled as the train rounded a turn, rushing through it at dangerously high speed.

"Look!" Zane called, gripping the open doorway and pointing. James peered aside, looking through the gap between the cars. Trees whipped past in a blur, and then something else flickered past: wooden signs and piles of gravel and railroad ties.

"It's the new extension!" Zane yelled, his face very pale.

"The new what?" Rose cried, shaking her head.

"Didn't you read the sign?" he called, exasperated. "It's the new track extension over the Sparrowhawk Gorge! We're off the main track! We've been switched onto the new extension!"

"Don't tell me," Ralph yelled, slumping. "The extension's not finished yet, is it?"

"No! The bridge over the gorge is hardly half-done yet! It's not supposed to be completed until next year!"

Albus nodded seriously. "This is bad. Very bad."

Merlin stepped forward, his face determined and his staff held before him. The wind whipped his

robes and streamed through his hair and beard. Instantly, the cloud of Dementors condensed, collapsing onto the doorway and blocking it. The students stumbled backwards, terrified and falling over each other. The Dementors hissed and roared, and James felt his blood chill at the sound of it. He'd never known Dementors could speak.

The boyyy…, they hissed in unison, and their voices were horrid, buzzing like hornet wings. James Sirius Potter… the boyyy mussst commme…

Merlin had not stepped back in the face of the angry swarm. Now, however, he turned slightly, looking back at James over his shoulder. His face was cold, his eyes like diamond chips.

"It would appear you are being summoned," he said, his voice carrying easily over the noise and wind.

"No!" James cried. "I don't want anything to do with that thing!"

"The Gatekeeper believes differently," Merlin replied. "And it is going to kill everyone on this train if you do not meet its summons."

James shook his head adamantly. "I can't face that thing alone!" he exclaimed, terrified.

"You will not be alone," Merlin answered, smiling humorlessly. "I will be accompanying you."

James looked into the sorcerer's face. What he saw there was complete confidence and determination. The Dementors may try to stop Merlin, but they would not succeed. James nodded slowly and stood up.

As he stepped tentatively toward the open doorway, the cloud of Dementors backed away, allowing him room. They swarmed feverishly, and the sight of them made James shiver.

"Don't!" Rose called, grabbing James' sleeve. "There's got to be another way! You don't have to do it, James!"

James shook his head. "I think I do, Rose. It'll be all right."

"No!" she cried. "You're daft! You can't defeat something like that!"

James shrugged. "I have to try at least."

Zane put his hand on Rose's shoulder and Albus reached for her hand.

"Don't do anything stupid, big brother!" Albus called.

"Here!" Ralph suddenly yelled, pushing forward. He held his wand out to James, handle-first.

James shook his head. "No, Ralph, that's yours! I couldn't!"

"Shut up, James!" Ralph said, and James was shocked to see the ferocity in the boy's eyes. "Merlin's right! My wand has unique powers! You might need the boost! You're not going to keep it anyway. I'm lending it to you. Understand?"

James nodded solemnly and accepted Ralph's huge wand. "I'll give it back to you when I return," he agreed.

Nowww..., the Dementors hissed in their awful monotone. James Sirius Potter…

"Keep your cowls on," James muttered nervously, pushing into the wind and blasting cinders. The rear of the coal car bore an iron ladder. James began to climb it, fighting both the howling air and streaming smoke from the engine. Beneath him, the track blurred past, and the clack of the wheels was loud enough to hurt his ears. Before Merlin could move to follow him, however, James decided to try the bravest thing he could think of. He took out Ralph's wand and pointed it at the great iron knuckle that connected the coal car to the rest of the train.

"Convulsis!" he called, attempting the destroying spell he had last seen Rowena Ravenclaw use on the painting in Salazar Slytherin's quarters. The spell struck the knuckle and exploded brightly. When the sparks cleared, however, James could see that it had had no effect on the knuckle.

"A worthy attempt," Merlin called, glancing up at James. "But the Gatekeeper has foreseen such measures."

James nodded, disheartened, and continued to climb the ladder. The Dementors swirled around him but kept their distance. James scrambled over the lip of the coal car and dropped onto the irregular pile of coal inside.

Behind him, he heard Merlin's voice call out firmly, "Chrea Patronym!"

There was a burst of silvery light and the swarm of Dementors broke apart, repelled by the force of the glare. James glanced back and saw Merlin clambering onto the pile of coal behind him, his staff glowing greenly in his hand. In front of Merlin, standing between him and James, was a large, ghostly jackal. The silvery light pulsed from it, and it bore its shining teeth in a silent snarl, forcing the Dementors back. James felt a little better seeing Merlin's ferocious Patronus, and he wasn't surprised at the form it had taken. He turned back and slowly began to force his way along the length of the coal car, struggling over the rough chunks of black coal. Trees whipped past, and James could tell that this length of track was unfamiliar. He had no idea how long they had until the train met the unfinished bridge. Panic tried to grip him, but James fought it back, concentrating on the task at hand.

Finally, he met the other end of the coal car and clambered through an open iron door. A shovel rattled on the small platform behind the engine, but there was no one in sight. Merlin climbed through the iron door behind James, but his Patronus jumped over the front of the coal car, landing on the platform with its hackles raised. The noise of the engine made it almost too loud to speak. Merlin nodded toward the closed door in the rear of the engine. It was painted bright red, just like the rest of the engine. Across it, in gold letters, were the words 'Hogwarts Express Engineers Only'.

James reached for the door handle and heaved it open. It was pitch dark inside the engine compartment. James took a deep breath, steeled himself on the swaying, speeding platform, and stepped into the waiting darkness.

The noise and wind vanished instantly. There was no sense of speed or motion at all. Nor did the space inside the engine feel hot or confined, as James had expected. It felt huge, silent, and eerily cool.

"James," a voice said comfortably, "how good of you to come."

James glanced around, but he couldn't see anyone. There was no sign of Merlin, or anything else for that matter. The space seemed completely dark and featureless but for a pool of dim light that James stood in. "Where am I?" he asked, gathering his wits. "Where's Merlin?"

"He's near," the voice answered cryptically. "Interesting fellow, Merlinus, don't you think? He was the first human I ever met, you know. His fear tastes particularly piquant." The voice sighed in a selfsatisfied manner. "As far as where you are, that's a rather more difficult question to answer. I didn't want you to be overly concerned about your friends, so I took us… away. Outside of time. Outside of… well, everything, really."

"Where are you?" James demanded, glancing around.

"Oh, I keep forgetting," the voice said, laughing lightly. "You humans don't much like the whole 'godlike voice out of nowhere' sensation, do you? I'm right here."

On the word here, the voice localized. James turned toward the sound and saw a figure standing before him. It was exactly the same figure he'd seen in Merlin's Magic Mirror, right down to the tattered robe with no feet and the dark, featureless hood. James scrambled back from it, gasping.

"I apologize again," the figure said, reaching up. "Perhaps this is a bit better."

The figure of the Gatekeeper touched its hood and then swept it back. James was afraid to look but couldn't help himself. He winced at the revealed shape, and then frowned a little.

"You're the Gatekeeper?" he asked, stepping forward again. "You look a little like… like my *dad.* But not exactly."

"This isn't how I truly look, of course," the figure said offhandedly. "I'm still learning about humans, I admit, but I've come to understand the sorts of shapes you find acceptable." The Gatekeeper smiled disarmingly. "You expected something awful, I presume? A thousand eyes and a long, forked tail? That sort of thing?"

James nodded, and then shook his head. "I don't know what I expected. It doesn't matter, really. What do you want?"

"Right down to business," the Gatekeeper said, nodding curtly, still smiling. "That's what I respect about you, James Sirius Potter. No sentimentals. I'll tell you what I want. I want to help you."

James shook his head. "I'm not buying that. You're a liar. You want me to be your host so you can stay here on the earth and destroy everything. I've learned all about you. You just want to use me."

"Alas," the Gatekeeper said, frowning a little, "put like that, it sounds rather awful, doesn't it? On the surface of it, I mean."

"Well…," James said, a little uncertainly, "yeah, it does."

The Gatekeeper nodded, pressing its lips together. "I guess that settles it, then. You say no to me, I get no human host. Shortly, I'll lose my footing on this earthly plane and be forced back to the Void. You win." The figure shrugged, as if mildly disappointed.

"Yeah…," James agreed tentatively, "I guess that's pretty much it."

"In that case, do you mind if we just chat for a moment, James? There's no harm in that, is there?"

"Er, I guess not."

"You fancy Miss Morganstern, don't you?" the Gatekeeper said, arching an eyebrow at James and winking. "I don't blame you. Really, I don't. Delightful girl. She and I were supposed to be… very close. I have to admit, though, that I had my doubts about her. Your dead Voldemort has his rather devoted followers, and they insisted she was the one for me, but I suspected differently. And, of course, I was right. I'm always right, James. That's not pride talking, mind you. Uncertainty is the hallmark of time-bound creatures. I see history as an open book, from start to finish. I know how things are going to happen because, metaphorically speaking, I've already skipped to the last page." The Gatekeeper sighed indulgently. "Let me ask you something, James: do you know who I really am?" it asked, tilting its head.

"You're the Gatekeeper," James answered carefully. "You're evil."

"Yes, yes," the figure said, waving a hand impatiently. "But besides all of that. I have loads of names other than that one, you know. There is one that I am particularly fond of. I think it'll amuse you."

James shook his head, feeling increasingly cautious. "I don't know what you mean."

"Then let me illuminate you, James," the Gatekeeper said, suddenly approaching James and dropping to one knee. It looked closely at him, its eyes sparkling mischievously. "James, my boy, do you remember the story? The one your friend Ralph regaled you with in Wizard Literature class? You do, don't you?"

James nodded, perplexed. "Sure, but I don't see…"

"You don't see because you don't look!" the Gatekeeper interrupted. It lowered its voice and said in a conspiratorial whisper, "I, James, am the King of the Cats!"

James backed away as fear tingled up his back.

"Think about it," the Gatekeeper insisted, standing again and following him. "I sit at the base of the steps, Lord Guardian of the doorway between the living and the dead! I determine who passes through the Void, who proceeds into the Everlasting! And, I might add, I am also the Lord of… who comes back!"

The Gatekeeper deftly snapped its fingers. Another pool of light appeared and James couldn't help glancing at it. A figure was climbing to its feet in the pool of light, looking around in surprise and wonder. James gasped and his heart leapt.

"Grandfather…," he said, taking a step forward.

"James!" Arthur Weasley said, laughing a little. "What are you doing at the Ministry? And what in the world was I doing on the floor? I must have tripped, clumsy me."

"Grandfather!" James exclaimed, moving to run to him, but the Gatekeeper placed a hand on James' shoulder, stopping him.

"You cannot touch him, James," the Gatekeeper said sorrowfully. "Not yet. Perhaps in time."

"But how…," James cried.

Arthur Weasley tilted his head and smiled crookedly at James. "Is this part of your grandmother's secret design?" he asked. "It is, isn't it? I know she's been planning some sort of surprise party. She's never been able to fool me, although I let her believe she can, the dear. Where's everyone else?"

"He cannot see me," the Gatekeeper said, looking back at Arthur. "Those that pass through never do."

"Are… are you real?" James stammered, giddy excitement welling inside him. "Is it really you, Grandfather?"

"What kind of question is that, James?" Arthur said, looking around. "Where are we, anyway? This isn't the Ministry after all. I have to admit, I'm rather dumbfounded. Did I get off at the wrong grate on the Floo Network?"

"No, Grandfather!" James cried. "You're… you had a—"

"Shh," the Gatekeeper said. "Don't tell him."

"Why are you doing this?" James suddenly demanded, looking up at the robed entity before him. "That can't really be my grandfather! He's dead!"

"Death is just a doorway," the Gatekeeper replied, shrugging. "You never knew that it was a two-way door. You love your grandfather, do you not?"

"What would you know about that?" James demanded, fighting tears of frustration and anger.

"I admit the concept is foreign to me," the entity answered, "but I have learned enough of humans to know it is of great power to you. You'd have your grandfather back if you could, wouldn't you?"

James bit his lip, his emotions raging. In the second pool of light, Arthur was patting his pockets distractedly, as if looking for something. "Wrong address," he muttered, laughing a little nervously. "Where'd I put that packet of emergency Floo powder? Molly always insists I carry it. She'll crow for days about the fact that I finally needed it."

"Yes!" James blurted, tears welling in his eyes. "I love my grandfather. But he's gone! You can't trick me! I won't do what you ask even if it means getting him back!"

"Selfless," the Gatekeeper said seriously, nodding. "A very respectable trait. I admire it, I really do." It raised its hand and snapped its fingers again.

A third pool of light appeared. James turned to look, blinking through a blur of tears. A figure seemed to stumble backwards into the light. He was tall and thin, wearing dark robes; his long black hair was ratty and matted with sweat. He caught his balance and spun on the spot, his wand out. Wild eyes spotted James and the man stopped, breathing heavily, obviously confused.

"Harry?" he called, frowning in consternation. "You're not Harry. Are you?"

James couldn't believe his eyes. "Sirius?" he gasped. "You're Sirius Black!"

"Ten points for you," Sirius replied. "Where am I? Where's Remus and Harry and the rest? Where's bloody Bellatrix, for that matter? I'm not through with that witch."

"Sirius!" James called, hitching a sob, completely at a loss. "It's… it's over! You were k—"

"The dead don't wish to know such things," the Gatekeeper interrupted, shushing James. "But surely you can see who this is. Sirius Black. More importantly, your father's long lost godfather."

James nodded, barely hearing.

The Gatekeeper went on. "Deny yourself all you wish, James. Return your grandfather to the realm of the dead. But will you be able to live with yourself knowing that you turned down the opportunity to give your father the one man whose love he has ached for every day of his life? Will you ever be able to look your father in the eye again, knowing you have denied him his greatest wish: to have his godfather returned to him?"

James' mind was reeling. "But they're not real!"

"What does that even *mean,* James?" the Gatekeeper demanded. "Look at them! They know not their own fates! For them, no time has passed whatsoever. They believe they are real! Who are you to tell them otherwise?"

"I don't know!" James cried, clutching his head.

"It is so simple, James," the Gatekeeper soothed, advancing on him. "I am the King of the Cats. You may join me and see all those you've lost returned to you. Your grandfather, your father's godfather, even your long dead grandparents. There is no drawback, James, only one small price. A price you won't even mind paying, I assure you. A price you will be glad to pay!"

"What is it?" James asked helplessly, looking back and forth between Sirius Black and Arthur Weasley.

"A small thing, a trifle," the Gatekeeper said, reaching out to James and placing its hands on his shoulders. "A service to the world, really."

"I'm not going to kill anyone," James said, shaking his head, tears streaming down his face.

"Look," the Gatekeeper whispered gently, turning James around. "Look before you answer."

Behind James was another pool of light. One last figure stood inside it, seeming rather surprised to be there. Long white hair hung on either side of a haggard face, and the eyes were filled with hate. James could instantly see the family resemblance. It was Lucius Malfoy.

"What is the meaning of this…," Lucius breathed. He reached for his wand, but couldn't seem to find it in his robes. "Where is my wand?" he said, looking past James to the Gatekeeper. "I demand to know where you have taken me, you foul creature!"

"This is the man," the Gatekeeper whispered over James' shoulder. "On his hands is the blood of dozens. It was his plan that both you and your sister die in the Chamber of Secrets. He is responsible for the death of Petra Morganstern's parents, and it is by his will that she has been cursed with the demented soul of Lord Voldemort. Even now, this merciless wretch plots murder and death. His heart is a black box of hate. Kill him, James. Rid the world of this madman. Surely he deserves it. Kill him. Do it now." As it spoke, the Gatekeeper backed away, as if giving James room.

James had meant to refuse. It was on his tongue to say no, but suddenly, he couldn't bring himself to do it. The Gatekeeper was right. Lucius Malfoy did deserve to die. He was irredeemable. James felt the wand in his hand even before he realized he was reaching for it. It was Ralph's. It felt hot and huge in his palm. It felt deadly.

"What is this?" Lucius purred, narrowing his eyes. "You send a boy to finish me? I know this one. He is as weak as his father is stupid. He will not do it. He hasn't the strength."

"He taunts you," the Gatekeeper said silkily, eagerly, its voice coming again from the air all around.

"Show him how wrong he is. Kill him."

James' hand trembled as he leveled Ralph's wand. It seemed to hum in his fist. It wanted to kill Lucius as much as he did. And then, when the deed was done and Lucius lay dead at James' feet, he'd have his grandfather back. And Sirius Black could be Dad's godfather again, just as he always should have been. James glanced back, and saw both Sirius and Arthur watching him. They were both frowning slightly, as if they couldn't quite see what was happening.

"James," Arthur said, his voice worried. "Be careful, son."

"'James'?" Sirius said to himself, glancing at Arthur. He looked back at James, realization dawning on his face. "We're dead," he said simply. "And somehow, some way, you're Harry's son, aren't you? Who is that beyond you… Lucius Malfoy! Beware, James Potter!"

James turned back, looking up into the smug face of his nemesis.

"Do it," the Gatekeeper hissed. "Kill him now!"

Lucius growled, "You cannot! You're weak!"

"I'm not!" James sobbed. He tightened his grip on the wand and pointed it directly at the taller man's heart. And then, with blissful suddenness, assurance washed over him. He wasn't weak. He could do exactly what he had to do. In his mind, he heard both Helga Hufflepuff and Merlin's voices: the right thing to do is always simple, but it is never easy.

"I am a warrior," James whispered to himself, gritting his teeth. "And the sign of a true warrior… is knowing when not to fight."

With that, James lowered the wand. He dropped it, and then turned his back on Lucius Malfoy. Slowly, he began to walk away.

"James Sirius Potter!" the Gatekeeper shouted. "You cannot turn aside! Kill him! You owe it to the world! You owe it to yourself and your father! You cannot deny the power I am offering you!"

James looked at his grandfather sadly, his heart breaking. Arthur smiled proudly and nodded at him.

"Strong, that boy is," Sirius said, his eyes black and sparkling. "Just like his father before him."

Slowly, the pools of light faded. Arthur and Sirius descended into darkness.

James kept walking. He was nearly at the edge of his own circle of light when he heard Lucius Malfoy's voice behind him.

"If you will not kill to become the host of the Gatekeeper," he said, his voice oozing hatred, "then I will!"

James knew that Lucius had picked up Ralph's wand. He felt it pointing at him. He stopped in his tracks, not turning around.

"Avada Kedavra!" Lucius hissed, spittle flying from his lips with the force of his rage. The bolt of green light sizzled through the air and struck James squarely in the back. James felt the force of it, and it pushed him forward slightly. Still, he did not turn. He stood precisely on the edge of light and shadow.

Lucius stared at the boy, his eyes narrowed and a grimace of hatred carved on his face. The boy should fall now; he was dead. Lucius waited, still holding the rough, green-tipped wand, still pointing it at the boy's back.

There was a faint ripping sound. A long, ragged tear suddenly separated along the fabric of the Darkbag on James' back, spreading from the point where the Killing Curse had struck it. James felt movement in the Darkbag. Something was awakening inside it. Many somethings, in fact, and they were hungry.

"What kind of trick is this?" Lucius drawled nervously, taking a step backwards. He eyed the rip in the Darkbag as a noise began to emanate from it. James steeled himself, curling his hands into fists. The noise increased, becoming a loud, busy thrum. And then, violently, the Darkbag erupted. Borleys poured from the hole where Lucius' Killing Curse had ruptured it. They'd tasted the raw magic of the curse, and they wanted more. They streamed through the air toward Lucius like a cloud of bats.

Lucius' eyes bulged at the sight of the advancing Borleys. Instinctively, he waved the wand at them, firing spells randomly. Jets of light blared from the wand, and the Borleys went into a feeding frenzy, ravenous and strengthened by the magic. They fell on Lucius in a cloud.

James finally turned, letting the shredded Darkbag slip from his shoulders. When he looked back, Lucius was completely engulfed in the Borleys. They swarmed over him, devouring him alive. He screamed as they feasted on him, sucking the magic from him, vampirelike. He seemed to be shrinking. He collapsed to his knees, unseen through the boiling, shadowy mass. It was horrible, and yet James couldn't bring himself to look away. Finally, Lucius' body seemed to completely come apart. He dissolved into a sort of crumbling ash and crumpled to the floor, his last scream rasping, echoing into nothing. Satisfied, the Borleys exploded away, screeching and vanishing wildly into the darkness. Within seconds, they were gone, lost in the Void.

James stepped forward. What was left of Lucius Malfoy poured out of his sleeves and the neck of his robe like ashen powder. James knelt and, very carefully, plucked two things from the crumbling dust of Lucius' hand. As he stood, he pocketed one of them: Ralph's wand. The other, he held in his hand, feeling the small, dark power of it.

"Put that down," the Gatekeeper ordered, and its voice had changed, become deeper, less human. "You know not what you have done."

James shook his head. "I know exactly what I've done," he said.

"You cannot defy me!" the Gatekeeper roared, and it revealed itself once more. It no longer looked human, however, but like an enormous cloud of swirling smoke and ash. Eyes swarmed through the cloud, all of them furious, glowing red. "No one can defy the Gatekeeper! Release the stone! You cannot contain its power!"

"That's true," James said, no longer afraid of the Gatekeeper, "but I know someone who can."

He turned, somehow knowing that Merlin would be standing nearby. Perhaps James had even somehow caused him to be there. He walked over to the big wizard and held out his hand. In it, the ring sparkled brightly. Darts of light flashed off the black facets of the Beacon Stone.

Merlin smiled a slow, humorless smile. Gently, he took the ring and placed it on his finger, seating it alongside its twin.

"And now," Merlin said, raising his hand, "as your earthly Ambassador and bearer of the *complete* Beacon Stone, I command you! This is not your world, nor shall you occupy it! Begone, Beast of the Abyss, Gatekeeper of the Void! I banish you to the nothingness that shall forever be your home! Depart this moment, and never return!"

The cloud of ash and smoke roared. It made to fall upon Merlin, attempting to consume him, but a sudden, enormous crack of vivid light appeared in the darkness, slashing it open. The roar of the Gatekeeper turned into a shriek as it was pulled upward, toward the crack. It fought against the force, spinning and writhing, and for a moment, James thought it looked like a huge, inverted cyclone. And then, with a blinding flash and a clap of thunder, it was gone, banished back to the Void from which it had come.

James blinked in the silence. He took a deep breath and turned back to Merlin, exhausted.

"Is it gone?" he asked. "Gone for good?"

Merlin nodded slowly. "The door between the worlds is shut."

It was over. James turned to look back, curious to see if there was any remaining sign of that blinding crack into which the Gatekeeper had vanished. There was nothing but blackness and silence. And then —

There was a flash and James stumbled; light and noise exploded around him. He squinted, gasping for breath in the sudden noise and rush of air; he was back on the rear of the Hogwarts Express engine again, as if he'd never left it. Trees blurred past, just as before, but when James looked out over the coal car behind him, the air was bright and clear.

"The Dementors are gone!" he called to Merlin.

"Sent back to the Void along with their master," Merlin agreed, nodding.

James grinned in relief, and then suddenly remembered the train's perilous destination. "We have to stop the train!" he yelled, his eyes widening. "It's going to go off the unfinished bridge! Everyone on board will be killed!"

Merlin nodded again, his face turning grim. Once again, James opened the door of the engine compartment. Instead of darkness, however, this time he found a cramped interior space, stiflingly hot. At the front of the compartment was a bank of incomprehensible dials and gauges. Above this, two broad windows looked out over the oncoming track.

"Which one is the brake?" James called, scanning the dials and levers helplessly.

"That large lever on the floor," Merlin replied, pushing up his sleeves. "Grip the handle and pull as hard as you can, James. No matter what happens, don't let go."

James wrapped his hands around the large lever, which was nearly as tall as he was. He coiled to pull it but then made the mistake of looking out the front windows. The trees had cleared ahead, revealing a broad, mountainous panorama. The track stretched out before them, spanning a dizzyingly deep, rocky gorge, but only partially. Less than halfway across, the bridge stopped, unfinished. James' knees went weak.

"Pull it, James!" Merlin ordered, raising his arms, his face hard as granite. "Don't let go under any circumstance!"

James gasped a breath and yanked the lever as hard as he could with both hands. Gears below the engine's floor screeched and clanked as the braking mechanism engaged. Steam released explosively from the boilers on either side of the engine, sending up great white clouds. The train lurched and began to slow, but James knew there was no way it would stop in time.

Next to him, Merlin held up his arms. He was muttering quickly under his breath, his eyes closed. James looked up at him from where he stood, tugging the brake lever. The great sorcerer was trembling very slightly, nearly vibrating. Sunlight suddenly poured in through the engine's windows, and James knew they had cleared the trees at the cliff's edge. The train had begun its journey over the gorge, swiftly approaching the end of the bridge. Behind James and Merlin, nearly all of the students of Hogwarts and their teachers were hurtling along, breathless, possibly even clueless of their fate. The train continued to slow, its wheels grinding, screeching, sending up sparks, but it was no use. James craned to look through the windows and saw the end of the track approaching alarmingly fast. A wooden 'X' had been erected across it to keep workers from accidentally walking off the end. It looked pathetically fragile as the huge crimson engine bore down on it. And then, fleetingly, James saw motion at the end of the track. Something green was moving just beyond, so fast that he could barely see it. Even as James watched, however, the end of the track disappeared beneath the sightline of the engine's windows. He gritted his teeth, pulling the brake lever with all his might, and waited for the long, sickening drop.

The engine lurched noisily as if it had bumped over a curb, and James nearly lost his grip on the

brake lever. Next to him, Merlin swayed but remained upright, hands still raised, still muttering under his breath. Amazingly, the train did not fall. It continued to move forward, pushed by the weight of the cars behind it, slowing almost imperceptibly. Like Merlin, the engine suddenly seemed to be vibrating. As it gradually lost its momentum, the vibration increased, becoming a noisy, jarring shudder that threatened to shake the engine apart at its bolts. One of the windows exploded in a starburst of glass, peppering the inside of the compartment with glittering shards. James winced as bits of glass and warm autumn air blew past him. A moment later, he craned to look through the broken window, his eyes wide and disbelieving as the gorge spread beneath the advancing train. The engine slowed, rattling and grinding until finally, after what seemed an eternity, it lurched to a halt. The sudden cessation of inertia threw James off balance and he stumbled to one knee, still gripping the brake lever.

Silence descended on the engine, shocking after the noise and chaos. It rang in James' ears. Shuddering, he took a deep breath and struggled to stand, shaking bits of glass from his hair.

"That was—" he began, and then jumped up, throwing his shoulder under Merlin's arm as the big wizard began to collapse. "Ugh! You're—unf!—heavy! What's wrong?"

Merlin struggled to hold himself up. He groaned and clamped a hand to his head as if to keep it on his shoulders. Slowly, he managed to support himself, and leaned against the wall of the engine compartment. James glanced up at him, frowning curiously, and then peered closer.

"What's happened to you?" he asked breathlessly. "You look… old!"

Merlin's face, not exactly young to begin with, was lined with wrinkles. There were heavy, dark circles under his eyes. Even his beard and hair seemed to have grown and become threaded with iron grey. He looked up wearily, saw James' concerned look, and smiled ruefully.

"Twenty years in thirty seconds," he said, his voice dry and cracked. "Losing two decades that quickly does tend to take it out of someone."

James boggled at him. "Where'd you lose it?"

"Right beneath this train," Merlin said, pushing himself up and turning. "Come. I cannot guarantee it'll hold much longer. We need to get everyone off this train, and quickly."

James followed the great sorcerer, and as he did, he felt the strangest sensation; it was as if the engine was swaying slightly, like a tree limb in a stiff breeze. As they clambered over the coal car and into the first passenger compartment, returning to the joyful congratulations of Rose, Ralph, Zane, and Albus, James couldn't help glancing down. The wheels of the train seemed to be choked with fresh green leaves and vines. Butterflies flitted amongst them, their wings flashing in the afternoon sun.

Half an hour later, James stood with the rest of the train's passengers a quarter of a kilometer away, spread along the edge of the gorge. They were awaiting a second train, which had been dispatched to carry them the rest of the way home.

Zane kicked a stone over the ledge and watched it bounce down the crags into the trees below. "What was it like up there in the engine?" he asked James.

"Terrifying," James said with feeling. "I thought we were dead, no question about it."

Rose asked, "Did you see him do it?"

"I saw him do something. I didn't know what he was up to."

"Twenty years' growth in thirty seconds," Albus said wonderingly. "I wouldn't believe it if I wasn't looking at it."

"The thing that amazes me most," Ralph commented, staring out over the gorge, "is that he got the tree to grow in the shape of the tracks!"

Once more, James looked out over the forested gorge between the mountains. From this angle, he could see it clearly. The unfinished train bridge ended less than halfway across. Growing from the end of the bridge, however, spreading another third of the way across, was what appeared to be a giant sequoia tree grown perfectly sideways. The tree was lush with foliage, billowing slightly in the freshening breeze. The Hogwarts Express sat atop it, steam still issuing from its boilers in a long white ribbon.

"He sent twenty years of his own life into making that tree grow," Rose said, shaking her head in disbelief. "Talk about communing with nature."

Zane nodded. "Yeah. He's still down in the hollow right now, 'communing' with the tree sprite of that sequoia. I'm just glad Merlin's the one that gets to explain to that tree how it grew so fast," he said, grinning. "And why it's got a steam train sitting on its trunk."

James, Rose, and Albus sat in the tall grass of the yard, blinking disconsolately in the morning sunlight. Nearby, Harry, Ginny, Ron, and Hermione stood talking quietly. James looked up, peering along the length of the dirt drive.

"See anyone?" Albus asked, kicking his heel in the grass.

James shook his head. "They're late."

"Why should they hurry?" Albus griped. "They already paid for it. All they have to do is sign the papers and get the key. Not that they'll ever use it."

"I wish this was all over," Rose said, sighing sadly. "I know it was my idea to come and say goodbye to the Burrow, but now that I'm here, I can barely look at the old place. Just knowing the new owners are going to tear it down…"

"Grandma and Lily are looking into flats in the city," James commented. "That could be nice. It'll be easy for her to take care of, and we could go see her whenever we want."

Albus muttered, "It won't be the same. Not without the Burrow."

James sighed. George and Angelina's wedding had been the day before, and, not surprisingly, it had been a very spirited affair. Everyone had been there, including Hagrid, Neville, and even Professor McGonagall. The former Headmistress had even danced a little, which had left the students slack-jawed with amazement. By contrast, sitting in the yard of the Burrow for the last time, waiting for the new owners to come and take it over, felt particularly disheartening. "A beginning almost always means an ending," James' dad had said as they got ready that morning, but James hadn't found that particularly comforting. Not for the first time, James found himself thinking of the final dream he'd had when he'd still had the phantom scar; the dream in which a somewhat grown-up Albus had given his wand to the young woman—Petra?—In the graveyard, who had proceeded to launch the Dark Mark and then turn the wand back on him. Obviously, that had never happened, and yet James simply couldn't shake the feeling that it was a sort of prophecy or prediction. Tabitha had told James that Albus was a boy with great potential, and that, James felt sure, had not been a bluff. Tabitha believed it. What did it all mean? James gazed at his brother in the sunlight—his brother, who bore the names of both a great Gryffindor and a great Slytherin, who looked so very much like his father, the Boy Who Lived.

"Here they come," Rose said morosely.

James followed Rose's gaze and saw a cloud of dust approaching from the end of the drive.

The three stood and brushed themselves off as the vehicle neared. They walked slowly over to stand by their parents. Harry squinted and adjusted his glasses.

"They have a different car than the one they drove to the bank," he commented.

Ginny said, "You would notice that, Mr. Auror."

"Must be nice," Ron mumbled. "Buying a house and a new car all in the same week."

"Shh," Hermione said, but without much feeling.

Harry was frowning slightly. "That's not exactly a new car. In fact…" Suddenly, his face broke into a wondering grin. "I'll be a hinkypunk's uncle…"

"What?" Albus asked, standing on tiptoes and shielding his eyes from the sun.

James looked as well. As the vehicle rolled closer, he could see that it was certainly not a new car. It was, in fact, very old but carefully restored. It bounced and jogged on the uneven path, winking sunlight off its chrome bumper and huge windscreen.

"It's the Anglia!" Rose cried, jumping up and down, clapping her hands. "Granddad's Anglia! But how?"

Harry was shaking his head, smiling. Ron frowned, puzzled, as the car ground to a squeaky halt directly in front of them. The driver's door swung open and a large figure climbed out. James didn't recognize the man at first since he still wasn't accustomed to that suddenly aged face.

"Merlinus!" Hermione said, stepping forward to meet him. "What are you doing here? How did you get Arthur's automobile?"

"I am happy to say," Merlin replied, "that it came with the house. This is the correct address, is it not? I assume I'd not find the lot of you standing in front of anyone else's soon-to-be-reacquired home."

Ron laughed. "This is the place, I guess, but what do you mean? Where are the Templetons?"

"Happily negotiating the sale of a condominium in Kensington Knob, I believe," Merlin answered, carefully closing the door of the Anglia. "After the rather unseemly amount I paid them for this charming domicile, I suspect they were able to increase their home-buying budget rather a lot."

"You bought the Burrow?" James exclaimed, a grin spreading across his face.

"But why, Merlin?" Harry asked, shaking his head in wonderment.

Merlin looked surprised. "I would think the answer to that is quite obvious. I am still rather new to this age and in need of a home for myself. The offices at the school are quaint, but a wizard of my temperament desires room to spread out. I find this cottage to be perfectly suited to my needs, if perhaps a bit too large. That is why I was hoping I might persuade the previous owner to stay on, to keep me company and manage the place during the school terms."

"You want Grandma Weasley to come live here again?" Rose cried happily. "Hooray! That's wonderful!"

Ron asked, "Are you serious? You'd really want Mum to keep living here?"

Merlin nodded dismissively. "Perhaps she'd indulge me with a cup of tea now and then. I, on the other hand, can help her to magically support the place. Seems a fair trade, does it not?"

Hermione grinned happily. "You'd have to lock Molly in the attic to keep her from making tea for you. Really, Merlinus, this is more than we could have hoped for. But where did you get the money?"

Merlin narrowed his eyes conspiratorially. "Did you know that Gringotts bank is over twelve hundred

years old? It's truly remarkable what a small investment can turn into over a thousand years. Let's just say that I will not be lacking for income for quite some time."

"You made a deposit before you zapped through time?" Ron exclaimed, his eyes going wide. "That's genius!"

"What fun is it being a sorcerer if you cannot manipulate temporal loopholes to your advantage?" Merlin agreed, matching Ron's grin.

"Let's go get Grandma and Lily!" Albus said excitedly. "Before she does anything stupid like renting some flat in the city! We can move her back in today, right? Right?"

"I don't see why not," Harry laughed. "If it's all right with Merlin."

"I'd not have it any other way," the big man replied. "In fact, we can take your grandfather's delightful vehicle. I believe we'll all fit inside if we don't mind getting rather close."

"The Anglia?" James asked as everyone began to clamber into the old car. "It'll take us forever to get into the city in that."

"I think you'll be surprised," Merlin answered, climbing into the driver's seat and smiling cryptically. "Hold on to something, everyone. This might be a little bumpy."

Carefully, Merlin pushed a large button on the car's dashboard. With a jerk and rattle, the huge canvas wings erupted from the car's sides, protruding from behind James' head where he sat in the backseat. Noisily, the wings began to flap up and down, assuming a steady rhythm.

"The wings work!" Albus laughed. "You got the wings working! Excellent!"

Slowly, accompanied by a rising cloud of windy dust, the car lifted off the drive. Ron whooped from the passenger's side window as Merlin steered the car in the air, aiming it toward the western horizon. To the sound of delighted laughter and Hermione's shriek of happy terror, Merlin stepped on the accelerator, pushing it to the floor. The wings buzzed, and the car nosed down, darting like a bumblebee over the yard of the Burrow and casting its shadow over the garage as it went.

For miles around, Muggle children looked up, wondering about the mysterious sound of laughter that passed quickly, fleetingly overhead.

The End

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More to Come (with your help)

Greetings, dear reader, and thanks for coming along for the ride thus far. I hope that you enjoyed "James Potter and the Curse of the Gatekeeper". These books have had quite a long and interesting story, most of which is detailed elsewhere, so I will suffice by offering a few quick words of thanks and offering you, the reader, some encouragement and a freebie. First, the thanks:

To Julianna So, who has edited nearly all of my books for the same reason that I wrote them: purely for love of the story; to my beta readers, particularly the endlessly encouraging, thoughtful and encouraging Hester, who is a big reason these stories exist at all; to Ms. Rowling and Warner Bros, who indulged my release of these stories despite the quirky troubles created for them when they were initially believed to be secretly responsible for them (a fact that I am still perversely proud of, despite the terror it instilled in me at the time); to my wife, who listens to everything I write as I write it and offers me that invaluable first reaction (not always positive); to Tom Grey and the longsuffering faithful who have been with me from the very beginning (I wish I could name you all!); to Dawn Bradley, who painstakingly created all the eBook versions of the JP books.

And now the freebie: before you hurry off to read "James Potter and the Vault of Destinies", allow me offer a little something of my own. As you know, I make no income from the release of James Potter books-- I am perfectly happy to write them purely out of affection for Ms. Rowling's Potter universe, and to share them for free with readers worldwide. However, it does take time and money for me to produce them. If you have enjoyed the stories thus far, allow me to humbly suggest a new story:

"Ruins of Camelot" is my second entirely original novel. It is a fantasy story, set at the end of the golden age of Camelot, and featuring appearances by a few familiar characters. In a sense, it is the ultimate prequel to the James Potter books, while still entirely new and original. If you enjoyed the JP story thus far, I suspect you will enjoy this tale as well (which I hope to develop into its own series). By purchasing it, you not only get a new story, you very kindly and actively support me, the author, as I work on the next JP book. It's a win-win, yes?

So. With that in mind, I hope you enjoy this little preview excerpt. If you like it, do consider procuring your own copy. It is available in paperback from amazon, as well as for your Kindle, Nook, iPad or iPhone.

Thanks for reading, and as always: onward and upward!

Ruins of Camelot (Excerpt)

The next day, Gabriella finally found Coalroot.

She had spent the morning (not that she could tell if it truly was morning or not) descending a long, straight shaft ever deeper into the earth. The walls of the tunnel had grown increasingly taller and narrower as she walked, so that she felt like a mouse crawling within the walls of a cottage. The air had become warmer as she progressed and was now quite hot. Sweat trickled into her eyes, and she swiped it away with the inside of her wrist.

There was light as well. Unlike every other glow that she had encountered in the caverns, however,

this light was neither blue nor cold. It was a burnished red, growing gradually brighter as she progressed. The sparks of her torch streaked ahead, following the course of the tunnel as if in the teeth of a hard wind despite the perfect stillness of the air.

"Whatever you do," Gabriella repeated under her breath, "do not talk about treasure. That's the only rule. Do not so much as say the word. Can we do that, Featherbolt?"

Featherbolt stood on her shoulder, his feathers fluffed out in an effort to cool himself. His wing felt hot against her cheek.

"Get off," she whispered, flapping a hand at him. "You're making me even hotter."

The bird launched into the air and squawked in irritation. He circled her, apparently unwilling to get too far ahead.

A vertical bar of deep red became visible between the walls of the tunnel some unknown distance away. There was subtle motion within its depths, as though from a slowly shifting cloud.

"I think we are very nearly there," Gabriella said, swallowing. "According to Helena and Goodrik, Coalroot will tell us what we need to know. So long as we do not say the wrong thing."

The air had developed a whiff of sulphur. The goblinfire rippled and flared, leaping towards the reddish light ahead. The rift grew as they neared it.

There was a noise. Gabriella heard it and realised that it had been going on for some time just below the level of audibility. It was a dull rumble, a sort of groan, as if the earth itself were shifting very subtly around her.

Featherbolt landed upon her shoulder again. He clicked his beak and shivered his head violently, raising the tiny feathers of his forehead into hackles.

"I know," Gabriella replied nervously.

Finally, after what seemed like far too long a time, they reached the end of the tunnel. Beyond its high walls, red depths stirred massively, like storm clouds at sunset. The stench of sulphur was overwhelming. Gabriella stopped and drew a deep breath through her mouth. Then, steeling her nerve, she stepped out into the red light.

The cavern was monumental. Its floor was a shattered valley, broken and jagged, strewn with boulders. Smoke poured from the cracks, dimming the air, and yet red light filled the space, reaching even to the ragged cone of the ceiling hundreds of feet up.

In the centre of the space, dominating it, was a shape that Gabriella simply could not comprehend. It was something like a twisted tree, so enormous that it would have dwarfed the entire castle of Camelot. It was black as coal, wrinkled with deep crags, cracks, and fissures. Its branches jutted up

and out in all directions, thick as highways and driven deep into the cavern's ceiling. Far below this, the tree's roots spread like rocky tentacles, laced with cracks. The cracks glowed orange, as if the core of each root was pure fire. Worst of all, the centre of the tree's trunk bore a gaping maw, burning bright red, as if lined with live coals. This was the source of the ruddy light that filled the cavern.

Featherbolt clung to Gabriella's shoulder, his talons scratching tightly on the edge of her armour. Slowly, staring wide-eyed up at the incredible shape, Gabriella walked out onto the broken plane of the floor.

GABRIELLA XAVIER.

The voice that spoke her name was not human. It was hardly even a voice. It seemed to be formed of the guttural rumblings of the earth itself, vibrating deep into her ears and thrumming in her bowels. It was simultaneously almost silent and massively deafening.

"Yes," she replied. Her own voice came out as a dry croak, but she could not seem to bring herself to speak any louder.

Gabriella Xavier… Xavier… Gabriella… avier… ella…

The voice rumbled onwards, breaking into echoes, dozens and hundreds of them. The echoes seemed to fade into great distance, and Gabriella had the eerie sense that they were being broadcast throughout every dark depth of the Barrens underground.

"Heh hee!" a much smaller voice suddenly called out. Coming on the heels of the diminishing monstrous echoes, this new voice was tiny and merry, like a jingle bell in the disastrous expanse of the cavern. Gabriella glanced around, seeking its source.

A small man was seated amongst the snaking roots of the tree shape. His back was bowed with age, and his bald head bobbled as he waved at her. Against all probability, he seemed to be sitting in an old rocking chair. He worked it gleefully, bobbing back and forth on its curved rails. Even through the distance, Gabriella could see that he was grinning at her merrily, beckoning her forwards.

"What in hell…," Gabriella muttered, her eyes still wide.

Carefully and warily, she began to move towards the wizened figure. It was slow work due to the disastrously broken floor and the rafts of noxious smoke that poured through the cracks. As she skirted these, Gabriella saw that the crevices glowed faintly in their depths, some as wide and deep as canyons. The rumble of the earth was still audible. She could feel it through the soles of her boots. Before her, the awful tree shape loomed ever larger. Waves of heat baked from its jagged surface, beating down on her. Featherbolt switched his head back and forth restlessly, still clinging to the lip of her breastplate.

"Hee hee! Come forth, Princess!" the tiny, old man called thinly, still waving. "Come and greet me. Let us speak! Oh my, yes." He cackled wheezily, gaily.

The floor around the snaking roots was shattered into sharp, uneven terraces, each one higher than the one before it. Gabriella climbed these cautiously as she neared the man. The enormous, black roots of the tree shape spread around her now, each one as charred and deeply cracked as embers. Where they sank into the ground, the rocks rippled with heat shimmers. The twisted trunk rose above her, scorched black and ribbed with deep, sharp crags.

"That's a girl," the old man laughed. His voice was nearly as cracked as the rocks around him. He smiled at her gummily, chewing his lips, but his eyes were brilliantly sharp, blue like the ice of a

winter millpond. "Come closer. Have a rest and visit awhile. Ask me your questions, Princess, and tell me your tales."

Gabriella was close enough to the old man now that he didn't have to raise his voice to speak. She neared him warily, and he simply looked up at her, his head bobbing on the stubbly stalk of his neck. He wore a rough, nondescript cowl, its hood pushed back between the knobs of his shoulders. Between his clasped hands was the head of a black cane apparently made of stone. Its tip was notched into the cracks before his bare feet. He rocked energetically, watching his visitor, apparently waiting for her to speak.

Gabriella studied him, frowning with consternation. Finally, she asked, "Are you… Coalroot?"

The old man grinned suddenly, stretching his wrinkled lips and showing his toothlessness. He rocked slightly faster. This, Gabriella figured, was answer enough.

"What was that voice I heard earlier? The one that sounded like the earth itself and spoke my name?"

"Hm-hmm!" the old man laughed secretively, his eyes dancing. He raised one hand and touched a finger to the side of his nose. He nodded and giggled.

Gabriella's frown deepened. "I was sent here," she announced. "I was told that you could help me in my quest. Is this true?"

"Perhaps!" the old man replied, nodding. "It all depends, does it not?"

"On what does it depend?" Gabriella pressed evenly.

The old man's eyes cleared for a moment. "On whether you ask the right questions."

Gabriella drew a sigh. She didn't have time for riddles from demented, old men. She looked around the ruddy depths of the cavern.

"What is this place?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her. "And who are you?"

"Ah-hah!" the old man brightened. "A question that I can answer! This is the restless grave of Chaorenvar, also known as Lord Vulcan, the undisputed ruler of the molten deep. These," the old man

raised an arm, gesturing at the charred tree-shape overhead, "are his frozen bones!"

"Chaorenvar," Gabriella repeated slowly. "The ancient fire mountain?"

"Aye," the man rasped passionately, "ancient but never at rest. This cavern is the negative of the mountain peak that once framed him! Alas, the broken slopes of his mighty shoulders have fallen away, leaving only its shadow in this tomb of earth, but the bones of Chaorenvar's fiery core remain. Do not let his tree-like appearance fool you! His branches are the shafts that broke to the surface above, spilling rivers of rock. His roots are the conduits to the molten oceans of the earth's heart.

And his trunk is the hellish throat of his wrath, what once belched liquid fire high into the clouds, raining ashy death onto the lands above for miles in every direction."

Gabriella was dumbstruck. She looked up at the petrified bones of the mythic volcano. Its molten heart still glowed, proving that it was not dead, but only dormant. The old man rocked and muttered to himself happily. He giggled. After a minute, Gabriella lowered her eyes to his again.

"Then that must make you the spirit of the volcano," she ventured, "I have read of such things in the myths. You are not as you may appear, but change your form for whomever you meet. Is this so?"

The old man grinned up at her and shrugged his bony shoulders, not as if he didn't know the answer, but as if he had no intention of giving it. The blue of his eyes seemed to flash in the baleful dimness. He leant towards her. "You may indeed call me Coalroot," he whispered harshly, as if sharing a delicious secret.

Gabriella went on, "What do you know of me besides my name?"

Coalroot tilted his head back and forth thoughtfully. "I know your past and future but not your present. It is the nature of my being. Time is to us exactly the reverse of what it is to you, for you know the present but never the future and barely the past. Oh yes. Heh hee! Many have come to me over the eons, and I always sense their approach. I know as well the nature of their leaving. If, of course," here, his eyes switched towards her and grew sharp, "they are allowed to leave. Heh hee!"

He sighed with amusement and then became more subdued. "But alas, I never know what anyone might do or say during the moments that they are with me. Perhaps they come to seek their futures. Or perhaps, instead, they come to steal from my hoard! Many come with that very intent, you know, for I have collected much treasure from the forgotten depths of the earth! More than most can imagine. It amuses me!" He cackled again, wheezing almost silently, and then asked with a conspiratorial leer, "Do you know of my hoard, Gabriella Xavier?"

Gabriella shook her head carefully. "I have come for knowledge," she answered. "That is all."

Coalroot chewed his lips as he considered this, nodding his head speculatively. His fingers squeezed and gripped the head of his cane, making balls of knuckles. "I have very much treasure," he acknowledged, winking one eye up at her. "It is right behind me, buried in a vast hollow. The gold

shines like the sun in the light of my fires. You wish to see it, do you not?"

"No," Gabriella replied warily, fear uncoiling in her belly like a snake. "I am here to ask questions. The only thing I seek is knowledge."

Coalroot's eyes narrowed, and his smile snapped shut like a trap. He stopped rocking and glared at her. After a very long pause, he began to rock again, more slowly now.

"I remember why it is that you have come to me," he admitted.

Gabriella exhaled with relief. "You know what I seek? And what is my mission?"

Coalroot shrugged slowly, his eyes still narrowed. She was going to have to ask of course. Creatures such as this never gave willingly. She straightened her back and drew a deep breath.

"I seek the one called Merodach," she stated clearly. "I must find him and confront him. I am given to understand that you know where he is."

Coalroot's lips stretched into a sly smile. "I know where he was yesterday, and I know where he shall be on the morrow; thus, I can offer a satisfactory guess of where he is at this moment. But you must know, Gabriella Xavier, that such knowledge does not come without a price."

Gabriella looked at him. The heat of the cavern baked over her, drying the sweat on her brow even as it appeared. "I have little to offer," she replied. "What do you require of me?"

"Oh, it is not that sort of price," Coalroot grinned, his rocking speeding up again. "The cost of knowledge, Princess, is more knowledge. You cannot leave here learning only that which you wish to know. You must take with you the burden of full clarity. It is the only way."

Gabriella's brow furrowed uncertainly. "You mean," she said, "that you will tell me more than I ask for? That is all?"

Coalroot's cackle filled the hot air, rising like bats into the darkness. On Gabriella's shoulder, Featherbolt ruffled his feathers violently and clicked his beak.

"Yes!" Coalroot wheezed gleefully. "Yes, that is all! But beware, Princess! It is indeed a price that many do not wish to pay! Full clarity can destroy a human as surely as any sword! Many have chosen to lie down and die beneath the weight of knowledge! Heh hee! Their bones are scattered amongst the rocks below, along with the skeletons of those who came in search of my treasure! Indeed, many more have come to see me than have left again!" He laughed shrilly, delighted.

Gabriella stood stoically in the face of the old man's mad glee. She tried to imagine what sort of knowledge could possibly lead to her mortal despair but could think of nothing. When Coalroot's cackles finally subsided, she faced him stolidly.

"Tell me what I wish to know," she declared, "and I will accept the burden of whatever else you give me."

Coalroot still tittered to himself, even as his eyes locked on hers, narrowing. "As you wish, Princess," he agreed. "The man Merodach is not himself on the march as you have supposed. He shall be in the same place tomorrow as he was yesterday. He awaits at the Theatre of the Broken Crown, just beyond the northernmost edge of the Tempest Barrens. There, the man has established his fortress."

Gabriella absorbed this with growing confusion. "He awaits…?" she asked faintly, worriedly. "For what?"

The old man giggled through closed lips, leaning forwards in his chair even as he continued rocking. "For something," he allowed, "but not for you."

Gabriella frowned in disbelief. "Then he is not on the march?"

"He is not," Coalroot winked cagily. "But his armies are, and they are many! Oh my yes! Many indeed! They are further than you have guessed, very nearly upon their prey! Heh hee!"

Gabriella's heart grew heavy as lead inside her. She nodded slowly, clenching her jaw. "I will go to him nonetheless. The beast must die. Vengeance will visit him, and his armies will scatter."

Coalroot did not laugh at this. Instead, he ceased rocking in his chair and leant even further forwards, his eyes turning icy as he commanded her gaze. "Will you?" he asked meaningfully. "And shall they?"

Gabriella stared into his cold eyes. A shiver coursed over her despite the heat of the cavern. She began to sense just how steep the price of her information might be. She took a step back from the old man's piercing stare.

"Yes," he breathed. "You begin to see, do you not? Everyone does at the very last, even with their dying breath. Even your mother, she knew the truth as she lay on her chamber floor bleeding out her last, her eyes glazing over, feeling the life force ebb slowly from her body. You have been granted a great gift, Gabriella Xavier. You will know that which others only learn when it is too late to matter. You will know the cords of fate, and see just how small you are in comparison to them…"

Gabriella wished to shrink back, but her feet remained locked to the stone. In the face of that mad glare, she regretted her choice. She wished she could take back her questions. Suddenly, the knowledge she had gained felt small and paltry compared to what might be about to come. Coalroot's eyes seemed to grow larger, expanding to icy pits, deep as the cavern lake she had encountered on her journey. The rumbling earth spoke his words along with him, forming a cataclysmic unison.

"You will go to the man Merodach in his fortress, and you will face him. It is your destiny," the voices rang, filling the cavern, their words falling like weights. "But… you shall fail in your quest. Your father's kingdom is already in ruins. Camelot will be no more. Its name shall be swallowed into

oblivion, reduced to myth, dismissed as legend. All those that you love… shall die. They will pass unto Sheol. And soon, Gabriella Xavier, you shall join them."

The echo of Coalroot's words rang through the darkness, no longer wheezing and shrill but clanging like iron, shaking the very cavern walls. He continued to stare at her, to glare straight into her, measuring the collapse of her will and seeming to delight in it. His smile was razor thin, sharp as flint.

Finally, after what seemed like several minutes, the echoes of his proclamation faded away, diminishing into the hidden depths of the Barrens underground. Gabriella stood there in the heat, the ruddy light glinting from her armour.

Slowly, she nodded.

"So be it," she whispered to herself.

Coalroot stared up at the young woman, his smile fading, and did something that he had not done for centuries, perhaps even millennia.

He blinked.

Greetings, reader. This has been a teaser excerpt of "Ruins of Camelot", *which is available via ruinsofcamelot.com. If you enjoyed "James Potter* and the Hall of Elders' Crossing"*, I suspect you'll also enjoy this tale. Plus, it's a great way to support your friendly neighborhood independent author since he (quite understandably) does not make any income from writing James Potter stories.*

Thank you for checking out the story, and happy reading.

G. Norman Lippert

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